

Halo: Spirit of Fire :: A Halo Wars Prequel

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Summary: On the ship's last colony mission, Captain Alexander will find his hands full when an ONI operative joins the crew at the last minute. Wrapped in suspense and intrigue, this tale will shape events for years to come. A backstory to 'Halo: Lost and Found.'

1. Chapter 1

****Halo: Spirit of Fire****

18 March 2518

Maintaining its orbital altitude with the Hangzhou Space Tether docking station, the Spirit of Fire waited for the last of the supplies to be loaded into its massive storage bays. From the bays' rafters were dozens of cranes that moved hundreds of crates, situating them according to content and weight. Manifests were double checked and new personnel were issued their quarters. A new set of Cryo Chambers had just been installed and the preliminary diagnostics were all in the green.

The colony ship hovered over Earth like a sleeping giant waiting to be roused from sleep.

Gathering his hands at the small of his back, Captain Markus Alexander stood in the docking station's command center as he watched the events begin to come to a close. His blue eyes traced over the angular lines of his ship, moving from nose to stern. The multi-tipped bow contained the keel-mounted observation deck—one of his favorite places to retreat when he needed to clear his head. Running along the port and starboard sides of the Phoenix-class colony ship were a number of modular units varying in shape and purpose, from portable living quarters to terra-forming gear. The huge, blocky engines were on standby, ready to thrum the two and a half kilometer-long ship into action. All of it made Alexander smile with pride.

He had been in command of the Spirit of Fire for nearly six years, colonized three planets, and was soon to depart on his last mission to the planet Verent. On the edge of UNSC-controlled space, it was the farthest from Earth a colony he started had ever been established, but it seemed fitting to Alexander that his last world to colonize would be the most ambitious. Keeps me on my toes, he thought, as he stroked his beard with his right hand. He shifted his gaze from the multiple monitors on the wall to the large, curved window to his left that offered him a beautiful vista of the Zhejiang coastline below. The Chinese province was just entering the middle hours of the night and thousands of lights sparkled in the cloudless atmosphere.

"Captain Alexander."

He turned around to find a short man dressed in a crisp, blue uniform with the Colonial Administration Authority insignia emblazoned on his left breast pocket. "Yes," Markus confirmed.

"I am Chamber Member Matthew Essex of the CAA." He held out his hand and greeted the captain formally with a handshake. "I assume everything is going well?"

Alexander nodded, recalling the man's name from an e-letter he sent. "We'll be ready to depart in a few hours." He inclined his head. "Thank you for responding to my earlier inquiry on the matter of mobile sentries. According to the initial planetary bio-scan, Verent has some sizeable vermin in its northern regions. Having an extra line of defense will help keep the civilians calm."

"It is the least we could do for a colony Captain such as yourself." Essex joined Alexander at the window and stared down at the sleeping Chinese coast. "Some see your youth as a point of draw among colony recruits."

"Really?" Alexander's face went long. Hmm. He had started his service aboard the Spirit of Fire when he was only 30 years of age. A graduate of the Reach Naval Academy, he was initially assigned to freighter duty, hauling supplies down the star lanes to the inner colonies. It was only after his courageous maneuver at the Siege on Coral that he was given a consideration for colony duty with the big ships. At the age of 25 he served as Second Officer to Captain Roggan in 2508 aboard the Spirit of Fire, and during their intra-system campaigns he was promoted to Executive Officer and later Captain in 2513. Alexander had considered applying for the military fleet, but he knew gaining a civilian captaincy was the fastest way to commanding a ship.

Markus never pictured his age as a reason for advancementâ€”rather the opposite. Even Roggan doubted his abilities on a regular basis. It wasn't until the entire colony of Avalon was on the cusp of insurrection did Roggan seek advice from Alexander. That was eight years ago. Luckily, Markus found a compromise between the miners and their property rights agreement. It was then that the CAA took notice of Alexander's political prowess. Along with his extensive naval training, he seemed the perfect fit to take over for Roggan.

"After this last mission it would be the Colonial Administration Authority's honor if you would consider becoming a Chamber Member,"

Essex continued.

Alexander's eyebrows met and he gave Essex a sideways stare. "Is that a formal offer?"

The shorter man snorted. "You know how politics work. We know the UNSC has already made concessions to you in regards to joining up with their fleet." He motioned out to the massive colony ship. "Hell, they'll probably take the Spirit of Fire and convert it into a war machine just to offer it back to you as a bribe."

Frowning to himself, Markus shifted uneasily. "I doubt the UNSC will go to such lengths." His face sobered. "Though they have been known to march right in and take what they want."

Essex sighed wearily. "You may think the CAA has little power out on Verent, but rest assured, you're people will be well taken care of." He turned to face Alexander. "Just remember where your loyalties lie, Captain. We can't have this last mission clouded with political haze."

Markus nodded. "Of course." As he shook the man's hand he could read the seriousness in Essex's expression, wondering if he was holding back some key information to soften the statement. "My priority is to the safety of the colonists and the establishment of Verent. I won't be entertaining thoughts of the future until we get back."

The CAA Chamber Member opened his mouth to speak but clamped it shut. He nodded once more. "Good luck, Captain." Matthew Essex walked out of the command center and left Alexander to his thoughts.

I wonder what that was all about. Even before he could think further on his conversation with Essex, a ping from the communications console echoed through the metallic room.

The woman at the console swiveled in her seat to face Markus. "Captain Alexander, a 'Patrick Endres' is requesting your presence on the Spirit of Fire's bridge. Shall I patch him through?"

Markus held up a hand. "No need. Tell him I'm on my way." He looked out the window at Earth below, one last time. Taking a deep breath, he started for the shuttle bay.

* * *

><p>As the bridge doors parted Markus Alexander breathed in deeply, taking in the scent of the newly renovated section of the ship. Crewmembers were getting accustomed to the various upgrades at their consoles, reviewing manuals and charts while talking amongst themselves. To Alexander, their hasty departure seemed a bit rushed, but it was a seasoned crew that adapted well to changes. And there have been more than a few changes.

Along with the comms array enhancements, the latest Point Defense System consoles had been installed next to the controller hub for the four main deck guns. Totalling an armament of 26 cannons, the PDS nearly brought the Spirit of Fire out of the ranks of average colony vessels and into the file of UNSC starships. Having that much firepower made Alexander wonder if someone hadn't already started retrofitting his ship for UNSC Fleet duty.

"Captain," Endres called from a cluster of techs mulling over the Navigation console. He detached himself from the group and greeted Markus with a nod.

Eyeing his Executive Officer closely, Alexander could read consternation in his face. "Are we ready to shove off?"

The lanky, brown-haired man shook his head. "Almost, sir, but I needed to warn you about something."

Frowning, Markus pulled Endres to the side and lowered his voice. "What is it, Pat?"

Endres leaned in closer. "There's been a pair of ONI officers wandering about, flashing their credentials here and there, and demanding to see restricted sections of the ship."

"Hmm." Having UNSC personnel scouting the *Spirit of Fire* before a departure wasn't uncommon but *ONI* was something new to Alexander. "Where are they now?"

"I asked them to wait in your cabin until you arrived."

"Good." Markus patted him on the shoulder. "Stay here while I attend to our . . . guests."

He marched out of the bridge in a hurried pace but managed to maintain the look of a walk. He passed numerous crewmembers, trying his best to keep a passive expression, and took a lift down to his private cabin on the midlevel deck. When his cabin door swiftly retracted into the ceiling, Markus found two stiff-backed men studying his collection of colony memorabilia on the wall. "Can I help you?" he asked as he stepped into the room.

They wore their black uniforms proudly as they approached Markus. If Endres had not informed him beforehand, he would have been able to tell they were from the Office of Naval Intelligence by their gait alone. *Arrogant sons of . . .*

"Captain, I am Major Deffin," the taller, graying man with the clipped accent introduced. He nodded to the blonde-haired man to his left. "This is Lieutenant Philip."

Markus nodded in return, since neither ONI officer offered him a hand to shake, and forced a smile. "What can I do for you, Major?"

"Straight to the point. I like that." Deffin pulled a small datapad from his pocket and handed it to Markus. "The Office of Naval Intelligence has seen it fit for you to have an advisor on board the *Spirit of Fire*."

Alexander took the datapad without breaking his stare at Deffin. "An advisor?"

"A liaison, so to speak," Lieutenant Philip vaguely clarified.

"A liaison to what? The UNSC?"

The lack of a response was enough to confirm his suspicions. _Essex wasn't kidding_. _They really are taking over whatever they want_. His eyes glanced over to Philip then down at the datapad's contents. As he read the UNSC declaration of orders he could feel a wave of frustration wash his mind with bitterness. "Lieutenant Jonathan Philip will be stationed aboard the _Spirit of Fire_ as the chief ONI officer?"

"That is correct, Captain," Deffin said, "though his role will not interfere with the colony project."

"And what _will_ his role be?"

"Lt. Philip will be available as both an advisor and a liaison to ensure everything is done properly and in accordance to UNSC and CAA guidelines."

Markus narrowed his eyes. "In my experience they tend to cancel each other out."

A sneer flashed over Deffin's face. "You can also think of this as an anticipatory performance review." He leaned in closer. "The UNSC's offer for you to joining Fleet Command is still valid."

Folding his arms across his chest, Markus considered Deffin's words. While combat was something he had already "experienced" in the civilian sector, he wasn't sure if battling against Insurrectionists was a career he wanted. On the other hand he knew he wouldn't be happy if he was just sitting at home writing his memoirs. _It _is_ an enticing lure_. While the promise of higher pay in the corporate sector was a fact, not having any immediate family in which to share it with nullified that reason. Despite his recently deceased aunt urging him to carry on the Alexander name, he never had time to settle down and start a family of his own. Colony planting was a lifestyle, not a career. Leaving his options open till after the mission on Verent seemed the most logical. _And I did just promise Essex I wouldn't make a decision yet_.

Philip took a step forward. "Rest assured, Captain, that the Office of Naval Intelligence desires to make the _Spirit of Fire_'s last colony mission a success by offering its full support."

Major Deffin lifted his chin. "Philip will be your Second Officer."

"What?" Markus blurted out. "What about Malcolm? He's been my Second Officer for the last two colony projects."

"And he will continue to be," Deffin soothed. "Lt. Philip will be the Second Officer in name only. To keep the appearance of discretion Malcolm will become Third Officer."

Alexander's face soured. "Do I have any say in this?"

"It's already been done." Deffin's right eyebrow rose. "Is there a problem?"

He handed the datapad back to Deffin and squared his shoulders. "Last time I checked, I'm still Captain of the _Spirit of Fire_. If that has since changed, please let me know," he retorted, trying to keep

his voice calm.

"Mind your place, Captain," Deffin said darkly. "If the UNSC sees fit to modify the crew, then it damn well will." He gave a thin-lipped smile. "If you feel the terms are inadequate, then I'm sure there are other captains willing to perform the task."

Momentarily taken aback by the Major's tone, Markus held his stare for a moment longer then let out an abbreviated sigh. "Please don't attempt to patronize me with threats, Major. I've been at this business for too long to quit over some mandated directive."

"So you accept the terms?"

Alexander nodded stiffly to Deffin. "As long as ONI knows I'm treating this mission as I would any otherâ€" by the book."

"Very well." Major Deffin clicked his heels and gave a curt nod, as if snapping into a formal demeanor was akin to flipping on a light switch. "Thank you for your time, Captain. I'll be looking forward to hearing of your progress."

Markus watched the Major leave and noticed the Lieutenant hadn't budged. When the door hissed shut behind Deffin, Markus turned to Philip. "Let's keep two things straight." He held out his hand and started ticking off fingers. "This is my ship and this is my mission."

The blonde man held up his hands and blinked his blue eyes. "I completely understand, Captain Alexander. Major Deffin can be a bit standoffish, but I know where the priorities are for the Spirit of Fire and her crew." He shrugged. "This sort of overseeing is taking place throughout the entire CAA."

Markus harrumphed. "If that's his idea of a job pitch, I'd hate to see how he interviews."

Philip nodded in agreement. "I've already read your file, so I know what to expect when it comes to success rate." He tilted his head and gave a lopsided smile. "Think of this as the potential for a character reference."

"I see."

"I won't be a nuisance, Captain," Philip said, his voice caked in haughtiness. "In fact, you'll barely know I'm here."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, knowing there wasn't any way out of the situation, then slowly extended his hand. "If I'm stuck with you then we'd better make the best of it."

Lieutenant Philip shook his hand in return. "Thank you, sir." He looked at the door that Deffin had just walked out through and frowned. "I better go see the Major off."

His comm unit in his pocket pinged twice and Markus stepped aside. "Make it quick. We're heading out within the hour."

As Philip hurried out, Markus took a seat at his desk and exhaled

through his nose in frustration. He knew the addition of an ONI spook would be nothing but trouble to his crew and ship. While his first impression of the Lieutenant was neutral, being placed into the Second Officer position—though "in name only"—was enough to make Markus wonder how tight the chain of command would be when push came to shove. If Philip tried anything to disrupt the order, it would either slacken or break. _Either way, the result could be detrimental to the mission_.

Retrieving his comm unit from his pocket to respond to the earlier notice from the bridge, Markus activated the device. "This is Captain Alexander."

The female voice of the ship's AI, Mnemosyne, came over his personal comm frequency. "All stations are reporting ready, sir. The _Spirit of Fire_ is loaded and ready to go."

"Thank you. I'll join you on the bridge shortly. Alexander, out." He flicked off his comm and took one last preparatory breath. Markus now had a lot to think about.

* * *

><p>The Spirit of Fire broke away from the Hangzhou Space Tether docking station and headed for open space. Once it had cleared the umbrella of orbital platforms Mnemosyne flickered to life on her AI pedestal in the middle of the ship's bridge. Taking on the form of a young Greek woman, Mnemosyne wore her long, curly black hair in a knot at the base of her skull and left a few loose strands to form rogue bangs that fell playfully on her rosy cheeks. Her dark eyes matched her equally dark eyebrows, adding a visual maturity that belied her young appearance. While her avatar was petite, she wore a long, flowing green gown that hid her feet and made it appear as if she was floating before them. "_Spirit of Fire_ is clear for slipspace, Captain."

Alexander took his seat in the command chair. "Thank you, Nemmy." When he saw her smile back at him he blushed. Mnemosyne had offered the nickname to him on their last mission as shorthand to the crew so they would stop butchering the annunciation. He was still getting use to it.

He selected a ship-wide transmission on his chair's comm device and cleared his throat. "This is the Captain, speaking. As you are all aware, this will be the final colony mission the _Spirit of Fire_ will embark on. I've served with many of you for the past few years and it has been my enthusiastic pleasure to have done so. Our destination is the planet Verent, a place many of you aboard will soon call home. There will no doubt be trials and travails along the way, but rest confidently that the crew and I will do everything we can to ensure a safe and habitable colony will be formed in the next year. It will take us nearly eight months to reach Verent, so please double check your Cryo Chamber assignments and rest easy. We'll be there before you know it."

He looked back at the AI and nodded. As the _Phoenix_-class colony ship leaped into the black void of slipspace, Alexander sat in silence. Despite the earlier encounter with Major Deffin and his sidekick Philip, there was much to look forward to on Verent. Markus loved working through the challenges brought by populating new

worlds, and he realized that Lieutenant Philip would only be another problem to work with. The Spirit of Fire was well stocked, well crewed, and ready to face whatever Verent had to throw at them.

Markus Alexander leaned back in his command chair and calmed his mind for the journey ahead.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Jacob Wilcox heard the pattering of footsteps coming around the corner long before he saw the little girl running barefoot into the corridor. A blur of dark brown hair and light blue from her jumpsuit, she sliced through an impossible gap between an equipment cart and an unsuspecting woman focused on her datapad.

"Juliana!" a voice called. A tall, slender woman dressed in a tech specialist uniform turned the corner and called out again. "Juliana, wait!"

Making the connection to the woman's plea and the rogue child, Jacob moved to his left and blocked the little girl's path. "Easy," he tried, raising his left hand.

"Excuse me," Juliana said, not even breaking stride, but Jacob quickly dropped to one knee and caught the girl in his left arm.

"Whoa, there." Jacob brought the little girl around to face him and found big blue eyes doing their best to pierce the mop of hair that came to her chin. Her eyes swept over him and paused on his security uniform's officer number. While appearing frightened, she didn't look away from Jacob's assessment gaze. "You know there's no running in the main corridors," he pointed out softly.

Juliana's brown eyebrows met together. "Sure there is. I see people like you run all over the place when the red lights flash."

The unexpected retort made Jacob crack a smile. "Well, I don't see any alarms going off."

"Juliana," the female tech specialist breathed as she came to stop before them. "You can't go running off like that." She squatted and turned the little girl around to face her. She pushed Juliana's hair back behind her ears and frowned. "Okay?" The woman looked over at Jacob and nodded in appreciation. "Thanks."

Jacob smiled back at her, noticing her striking green eyes and her long black hair tucked underneath her cap. "Not a problem," he managed to say, after being caught up in the woman's delightful eastern European accent. "Kids can be quite a handful," he added, even though he didn't have any of his own.

Juliana squirmed in the woman's grasp. "I don't want to go back there."

Jacob frowned. "Where?" The woman sighed and pulled the little girl

in for a hug. She mouthed the words "Cryo Chamber" to Jacob and he nodded in understanding. "You and your daughter do a lot of slipspace travel?" he asked quietly.

The female tech specialist smiled politely. "This is my niece, Juliana." She then made a face and held out a hand. "Harper Ackerman," she introduced.

He took her hand and shook it. "Officer Jacob Wilcox, at your service."

"Nice to meet you." Together they stood, Harper keeping Juliana in her arms as the youngster buried her face in the woman's neck. "This will be my first time in cryo." Her eyes seemed to cloud over as she added, "this is Julia's second."

"Oh?" Jacob prompted, but the flat smile Harper gave told him it was a sensitive subject. He reached out and gently patted Juliana on the back. "It's okay. The Spirit of Fire has the latest line of cryo pods this side of Reach."

"Which reminds me that I still need to calibrate the ones in Cryo Chamber 4." Harper sighed and shifted Juliana to her other side. "Thanks for the help."

"Not a problem," Jacob said with a smile. Harper's gentle nature matched perfectly with her kind eyes and he found himself staring at her. "Good luck, Miss Ackerman," he awkwardly said, not sure of what else to say.

"And to you, Officer Wilcox." She gave an abbreviated nod and headed back the way she had come.

Jacob watched Harper Ackerman walk away, finding it difficult to take his eyes off of her. He tried not to overanalyze their encounter, but it was something Jacob found himself doing with every female he ran into that paid him the slightest bit of attention—a fallout of his brief stint of psych courses he took a while back. She seemed pleasant enough to want to get to know better, but there was something in her demeanor that spoke of some relationship hesitations. Heck. For one, she has a niece to look after. And two, she has duties to attend to. Much like I need to—

"She's not worth it."

Jacob spun on his heel to find a blonde-haired man studying a datapad and leaning against the corridor wall. "Excuse me?"

"Tech Spec Ackerman," he clarified, finally looking up. "She would be nothing but trouble."

"I'm sorry?" Jacob said with a frown.

The man detached himself from the wall and lowered his datapad to give Jacob a clear view of the man's rank and name emblazoned on his right breast pocket. "I'm Second Officer Jonathan Philip, since we're all introducing ourselves." Philip pointed a finger at the datapad's screen and blinked his blue eyes. "The Ackerman name is a bad omen, Officer. Not really the gamble you want to take when planting a colony as far away as Verent." Though his tone wasn't accusatory, his

calm collectiveness bordered on impertinence. And that made Jacob uneasy.

"Yessir." He straightened up and felt his stomach turn to ice. Though Philip didn't say Harper had done anything wrong to disqualify her, he did try to lay a foundation of precarious trust. But the way Philip brought it up, to lump Harper into a bad family line, seemed to jump to a conclusion that didn't have any merit. That uncertainty thawed some of the ice in his stomach, but if what Philip said about Harper was true then Jacob would have to hear it from the source.

The Second Officer seemed to study Jacob for a while longer before nodding once. "Carry on."

Jacob moved aside for Philip and tried not to stare at the back of the man's head as he walked away. From what he knew of the Captain, it seemed odd that Alexander would have such a stuck up, debasing man as his Second Officer. Jacob shook his head. Regardless of his first impression of Philip, he was a ranking officer and he would follow the man's orders.

He worked his jaw for a moment, sighed, and started for the security office down the hall. His patrol of the starboard side civilian quarters was soon to begin.

* * *

><p>As Lieutenant Philip turned the corner he expected to catch a glimpse of the retreating tech spec and her civilian niece, but the two Ackermans were already lost in the sea of people heading towards the Cryo Chambers. He shrugged to himself and knew he would have plenty of time to let the woman know that she was being 'monitored.' He glanced back down at the screen and re-read the supplemental information ONI had on Harper Ackerman. While her family's history was colorful, it was also equally shadowed. Philip nodded thoughtfully to himself. She just might be the pawn that I need.

As the crowd began to thicken around him, Jonathan Philip cleared the contents on his datapad's screen and ducked into a lift. He keyed for the lowest level and breathed a heavy sigh.

He didn't really care if Officer Wilcox pursued her or not, but establishing a line of doubt and suspicion of a potential mark for a security officer was something Philip couldn't pass up. It was quick thinking, something Philip was good at, and the opportunity had just fallen into place without so much as leaning against the corridor wall and eavesdropping. While his ONI mission was based on a clear goal, it never hurt to stage events and people to his advantage in preparation of things to come. Yes, if and when the time comes, Ackerman will make a fine scapegoat_.

The lift door chimed open and he stepped into the large, open cargo bay. The huge doors on either side of the bay were closed, due to them being in the slipstream, and thousands upon thousands of supply containers were stacked to the ceiling in a multi-colored mosaic. The age of the containers made the color scheme sickening to look at for too long and luckily a deck officer walked over from a windowed room to greet Philip.

The wiry man saluted. "Sir. I didn't think we'd see any inspections just yet," he said with a worried, shaky voice. "Captain Alexander usually has XO Endres come down a few days before arrival, but I can give you the tour if you'd like."

Philip faked a smile and held up a hand. "No need, Parkins," he read off of the man's uniform's name stitching. "I'm just trying to get acquainted with the Spirit of Fire." He waved his hand to take in the massive bay. "It all looks very impressive. Mind if I just stroll about?"

Parkins frowned. "Um, that may be a bit difficult, sir. We're still shifting crates around and it could be dangerous to navigate around all of the movers."

"I understand." He looked past Parkins and saw a stairway leading to a balcony with all manner of controls and monitors. "Another time then?"

"Yes, absolutely," Parkins said distractedly as he followed Philip's gaze. "Oh, would you like a better view of the haulers as they work?" he offered.

"Lead the way." He followed the deck officer up the stairs and saw the expansive view put into scale that eyes on the ground couldn't see. The enormous cargo bay went on for hundreds of meters, nearly clouding over at the bay's end. It was quite a view.

"From up here we're able to use our Closed Circuit Cam network to monitor all of the haulers in real time," Parkins pointed out, flipping on one of the screens. The image shifted every five seconds to cycle through countless sections of the cargo bay. "We'll be at this for quite a while," Parkins continued. "It usually takes us several weeks to—" The deck officer cut himself off when his comm beeped. "Excuse me, sir, but I need to take this down in my office."

"I should leave you be, anyway. I can see myself out." Philip nodded and Parkins flew down the steps, narrowly avoiding a fall at the end. Klutz. It had been a while since Philip had been on a civilian vessel, and the level of discipline and adherence to rules and regulations was lax enough that he missed his assignments aboard the smaller UNSC ships. But it was just another technique to exploit the crew for his means. It wasn't that he hated the civilian sector; he just knew the majority of them wouldn't understand that ONI priorities were for the better of all Humanity.

Instead of heading back down immediately, Philip stepped up to the console below the screen displaying the shifting images and entered a specific lot number from his datapad. The screen flashed black once then displayed a stack of crates in a dark corner of the bay that were simply labeled: Fertilizer. He smiled sardonically.

Major Deffin had seen fit to give Lieutenant Philip more than enough resources on this mission than he could have hoped for. Inside those mislabeled crates was key equipment that ONI had packed specifically for Philip's mission to Verent. Along with a few of the large modular units anchored to the side of the Spirit of Fire, the gear was spread throughout the ship so as to not cause suspicion, should one

be found out.

There was much responsibility placed on Philip's shoulders. He knew he had to play multiple roles during his time aboard the colony ship, and the longer Captain Alexander didn't know what he was up to the better. Philip knew the eventual discovery of ONI's mission was more than likely to happen, but if he played everyone right into his web the end result would be a major victory to the war effort. _And this mission _has_ to succeed_.

Jonathan switched off the display and reset the image cycle before heading back down the stairs. He waved to Parkins through his glass enclosure of an office and entered the lift. As he started his journey to the bridge, Philip knew he would be cutting everything closeâ€”trying to maintain the appearance of an ONI observer to Alexander, a Second Officer to the crew, and a Special Operations ONI officer to Deffin. But it was something he was good at.

He raised his chin and smoothed his uniform over his chest, waiting for the lift doors to open to his destination's deck.

* * *

><p>Harper Ackerman suppressed a shiver as she carried Juliana into Cryo Room 2. The dim blue lighting helped create the atmosphere of an underground base camp near a polar region of some isolated planet. The hissing release of compressed air fogged the room over and made Juliana shudder in Harper's arms. "It's okay, Julia," she gentle whispered. "No bad men are coming for you anymore."<p>

Juliana sniffed, but at either the cold conditions or her disposition Harper couldn't tell. "You promise?"

Harper swallowed past the lump rising in her throat. "I promise."

It had only been six months since the child had lost her entire family. Juliana's parents had taken their two daughters on vacation to Arcadia, but during the return trip home, their passenger cruiser was hijacked by people claiming to be Insurrectionists. During the boarding, Juliana's father was killed trying to fight back, while her mother and sister were taken away. Juliana had ran and escaped capture by hiding out in one of the cryo-pods. She stayed there for almost 20 hours till a UNSC patrol ship came to her rescue. Juliana survived along with just a handful of others. Harper had assumed custody of her niece when she had returned to Earth, but in preparation for the colony planting to Verent Harper had declined a renewal of her apartment's lease thus leaving her with no other option than to bring Juliana along.

A half-naked woman brushed past them, her teeth chattered loud enough to hear, and stepped into a pod farther down the row. Harper gave the woman a nod and silently thanked the quartermaster for the gender separation of Cryo Rooms. It seemed commonplace to have men and women segregated, but some more liberal passenger liners that she had read about combined the sexes so as not to "discriminate." On the _Spirit of Fire_ the rooms separated by gender in pairs, and Harper was dreading doing the maintenance work on Cryo Room 4.

As Harper passed the woman in the pod, she heard it close around the now fully naked female and lock for the duration. Looking for the

specific cryo-pod designated for Juliana, Harper found "24-2-60" on the end of the rowâ€_Deck-Room-Pod_. Bending her knees, she set Juliana down slowly. "It's just like taking a long nap," she tried to explain. "It'll be over before you know it."

Juliana looked up and blinked her blue eyes. "Are you going to stay with me?"

"I'll be right next to you when my duties are done," Harper said, pointing to the pod beside Juliana's. "Let's get these clothes off you." The little girl lifted her arms and Harper pulled off her thermal shirt as Juliana stepped out of her matching trousers. Her jumpsuit had already been removed at the lockers. Harper picked her up again and pressed the pod's release button. The three-sectioned door opened up like a metallic flower and she lowered her niece into the contraption.

Juliana shivered in the blue light and Harper leaned in to give her one last hug. "Close your eyes." The child complied and Harper stepped back and activated the pod, letting the ship's AI set the predetermined duration on the keypad. "Love you," she said quietly, as the door locked Juliana in. The pod sealed properly and Harper watched as the crystal-like pattern of cryo-freeze enveloped Juliana's entire body. Long after the keypad beeped an affirmative to notify her of Juliana's hibernation stability, she couldn't take her eyes off of her niece's face.

It had been such a hard life for someone so young to have endured, and Harper wasn't even sure she would be able to properly care for her the way the girl needed. Harper was only in her mid twenties and didn't really know that much about childcare, let alone watch after one that's been traumatized. The CAA had offered Juliana counseling sessions from the onboard doctor, but those wouldn't start till a few weeks out to Verent. Childcare was promised to help a working guardian, but Harper wasn't expecting any big breakthroughs with the girl's timidity and hesitancy to trust anyone other than her aunt.

A static hiss followed by a beep from her comm broke her thoughts. She pulled the device from her jumpsuit's deep right pocket. "This is Ackerman," she answered, unfolding the headset and securing it behind her ear.

"We're waiting for you in Cryo Room 4. Where are you?"

Harper growled to herself at losing track of time. "I'm on my way," she mumbled, and switched off her comm. She placed her palm on Juliana's cryo pod till the icy cold temperature tingled her skin. "Rest easy." As she started for the exit, the palm print fogged over and left its lasting impression on the glass surface.

* * *

><p>Retiring for the evening to his cabin, Captain Alexander was slouched in his desk chair and scratching his beard when he looked up at his Executive Officer. "Am I crazy?"<p>

Seated across from him, Patrick Endres shook his head automatically but then frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Letting that ONI spook on my ship."

The XO raised an eyebrow. "You think he could cause trouble?"

"I don't know." Markus stifled a yawn with his right hand. "He may very well be just on a scouting mission for the UNSC like Deffin said."

Endres' frown deepened. "He wasn't on the bridge when we entered slipspace, nor was he in the officers' lounge during dinner."

Markus waved away the concern. "Let him roam, if it'll get him off my back. I'm not going to complain if he keeps to himself."

"It's your call, Captain," Endres said plainly.

Markus sat up and looked his XO in the face. "You think he's hiding something?"

Patrick Endres shrugged uncomfortably. "Possibly."

"You think we should keep an eye on him?"

"Absolutely."

Markus leaned back momentarily in thought. Philip, while mysterious in nature, was still limited in his access to the ship, hence the demands he and Deffin made earlier about wandering about. As Captain, he could simply raise the security level to 2 or 3 and have any place Philip wanted to go off limits. _Though that might cause some panic_. While a certain level of suspicion was healthy, Markus didn't need a sideshow going on while he ran the ship. _Still . . ._ The Captain placed both hands on the table and gave Endres a smile. "Then congratulations, Pat, you've got another responsibility to add to the list."

The face Endres made was priceless. "Sir?"

"I can't have a security detail follow him around, could I? You'd be perfect under the cover of an Executive Officer properly training an up and coming Second Officer." Markus gathered his fingers together. "At least until he's gone into cryo-sleep."

The XO's brow furrowed. "And what if he doesn't go into the freezer?"

"Then we'll have newly-demoted Third Officer Malcolm look after him," Markus replied casually.

That comment made Endres crack a smile briefly. "That's cruel even for you, sir." His face smoothed over and he slouched his shoulders. "You think there's going to be trouble on Verent?"

The Captain took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I'm always expecting trouble with a colony plant. I just hope it's not going to stem from one my officers."

Endres pushed himself out of his chair and stood. "Then I'll watch Philip like a hawk."

Markus pursed his lips. "Just be careful, Pat. Don't become too

conspicuous."

"Understood, sir."

As his XO walked out of his cabin, Markus Alexander couldn't help but feel a tingle in the back of his mind about Lieutenant Philip. Having the ONI operative on board with only a few of the officers knowing his true identity added to his uneasiness. But what unsettled him the most was that Philip held the title of Second Officer, and if something happened to himself _and_ Endres then the ONI op could take over as acting-captain.

Markus opened his hands and forced himself to relax. They were still a long way from Verent and he was hoping that any kinks in the mission would be hammered out by the time they arrived in system. He switched off his personal terminal built into his desk and rubbed his tired eyes. It had been a day full of content. Chamber Member Essex's sentiments echoed in his mind. _"Just remember where your loyalties lie."_ It was a statement Markus figured the entire crew of the _Spirit of Fire_ would have to answer at some point.

He could only pray for a positive outcome.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Harper Ackerman zipped her jumpsuit up to her throat and secured her long black hair underneath her cap. She gulped down the last of her coffee and cringed from the burning sensation on her tongue. Grabbing a few ration bars from her footlocker, she rushed out of the small quarters she shared with Juliana and started for her place of work on the opposite side of the ship.

Her morning had barely begun when she was called in before her shift was scheduled to start. The lead tech had told her to plan on a long day and Harper knew something major had gone wrong. As she jogged down the mostly empty corridors, her utility belt jangled and clanked, announcing her presence to those that might possibly be around the corners. In the end, the exercise helped her wake up, and by the time she reached the Lead Technician's office Harper was wide awake.

When she slowed down outside the anteroom she could see the office had overflowed of staff and techs began to spill out into the separation room. The gathered crowd was full of murmurs and after catching her breath, Harper tapped the shoulder of one of the techs standing on the edge of the group. "What's going on?"

The gruff-looking man grunted. "DME," he muttered.

Harper frowned. "Great." DME stood for Data Manifest Error, and the code was used when Procurement had either forgotten to log their manifests or had mislabeled them. Either way, it usually meant her department had to reenter the information manually, since Procurement was conveniently stationed back on the Space Tether. "Where's the boss?"

"Frasure's about to hand out the assignments."

Right on cue, Lead Technician Frasure's arm appeared above the crowd and he slowly began working his way to the center of the group. A small circle broke around the short, stocky man and the talking ceased. "Due to some idiot's inability to hit the TRANSMIT button, we're all going to clean up Procurement's mess. A DME in the Modular Firebase Units is the cause for your untimely wakeup call, so those of you that are returning to Earth can direct your complaints accordingly."

Harper rolled her eyes and hissed a sigh. One of the many reasons the _Spirit of Fire_ was so efficient at planting colonies was its ability to drop Modular Firebasesâ€”in the form of portable, interlocking buildingsâ€”from orbit. Once the surface of a planet had either been surveyed or cleared, a series of platforms could be released from the port and starboard sides of the ship. It was a system developed early on, but one that relied heavily on a construction system that the ship's AI would oversee. And until they fixed Procurement's error, Mnemosyne wouldn't be able to sync the _Spirit of Fire_'s systems with the Firebases, thus putting the colony project on hold.

Frasure waved away the growling voices. "Since this was supposed to be done before we even left the dock, Captain Alexander has asked us to make this a priority, so all of your other assignments will be put on hold until we get this done." He pressed a key on his datapad and a series of beeps echoed in the cramped space. "I've already transmitted your specific orders to your personal datapads."

Harper pulled her rugged, field-issued datapad from her belt clip and skimmed over Frasure's file. She had been assigned to cataloging one of the portside Firebases near the very end of the line. There wasn't even a proper label header on the entry so she figured that would have to be entered in manually. _Ugh_. Filing in the manifest would take a few days, maybe one and a half if she were rushing it.

"As you can see, it's a tall order," Frasure continued. He scratched the stubble on his chin and folded his arms across his chest. "Any questions?"

A man on the far side of the room stood up on his toes. "Yeah, is this considered 'overtime' or just regular hour pay?"

Frasure snorted. "What do you think?"

Everyone grumbled.

* * *

><p>At first, Patrick Endres tried to find Jonathan Philip the old fashioned wayâ€”by looking. But after spending his morning hours roaming the officers' usual hangouts, he decided to give the ersatz Second Officer a call on his comm. Patrick's first try was unsuccessful, but with the help of his personal terminal in his private quarters he found the man's general location to be near the aft bulkheads. He knew using the ship-wide positioning system was reserved for finding non-responsive crewmen in moments of crisis, but he was determined to find out why the Lieutenant was being so elusive. What is Philip was doing down there_?_

With more and more personnel heading to Cryo every hour, the halls were getting divisibly less crowded. Most of the civilian children were already frozen and Patrick noticed wandering parents look nearly absentminded without a little one holding on to their hands. Frowning to himself, he wondered if he'd ever share that sentiment with someone else.

Before departing for Verent, he had mutually broken off his relationship with Sarah, a fellow colonial, but being back on the _Spirit of Fire_ and seeing all of the close-knit families made Patrick want what they had. He and Sarah left with a desire to see each other after he returned, but her Earth visa would expire before he'd be back and she would be sent home to Coral, his home planet. _Promises made were nothing if they were never kept,_ Patrick thought._ But we never did make any_.

Clearing away the distracting thoughts with a shake of his head, Patrick ran a hand through his brown hair and put his cap back on. He was never a fan of headgear of any type, but regulations were regulations and he complied. And rules _were_ something he was a fan of. Being a young Executive Officer aboard a _Phoenix_-class colony ship had its pluses and minuses. While the crew respected his title, sometimes they took his orders and recommendations with hesitancy due to his age. Endres wasn't sure why. He accepted the XO position at the same age Alexander accepted his XO post with Roggan. _Maybe it's because I haven't been fully tested._

He held on to that thought as he stepped past a herd of technicians grumbling to themselves and he head deeper into the bowels of the ship. It seemed odd to wish danger upon himself, much like accommodating the Captain's request to keep an eye on Philip, but Patrick felt it was something he had to do. It was part of the grooming process of all civilian crewmen wanting to advance their career. The call of military life in the UNSC was always there, but he detested their handling of the campaign against the Insurrectionists. While he had no love for Innies, he did understand their plight for freedom. He thought it best just to stay out of it all and remain a civilian.

Consulting his bearings one last time, Patrick turned the corner and started down the narrow hallway that housed various maintenance equipment rooms. The nearest door on his left swung open and he almost ran right into an emerging Jonathan Philip. While Patrick did his best not to gasp, the Lieutenant looked up and slowly shut the door to the room labeled: Zero-G Equipment. "Second Officer Philip," he managed to squeak out.

"Endres," Philip said with a curt nod. He took his right hand off the door handle and gathered it with his left at the small of his back. His face was passive, yet looked to be under rigid control. "I just noticed that you were calling for me earlier."

Patrick willed himself to nod, still feeling the rush of adrenaline from the sudden, unexpected encounter.

"And did you need something?" Philip asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes." Regaining his composure, he straightened up and recalled his position as a superior officerâ€”regardless of any ONI affiliation

Philip had. He didn't know why he felt so nervous around Philip, but here and now was the last place he needed to show it. Patrick felt heat rise to his cheeks when he realized he didn't have anything specifically to tell him. When the Lieutenant cleared his throat, Endres jolted out of his stupor. "Yes, the Captain and I would think it best for you to stay more in line with the usual Second Officer routine" to keep the appropriate appearance."

A frown tugged at the corner of Philip's mouth. "I'm sorry, but I didn't think I was doing anything out of sorts."

Back in his rhythm, Patrick gave him a flat smile. "You've been wandering about the ship on your own. That's not the way we do things on the Spirit of Fire." With each word, Endres felt his confidence building.

Philip tilted his head. "My apologies then, XO Endres," he said calmly. "I figured a little impromptu inspection would give me an unbiased view of the ship's crew."

Patrick opened his mouth for a retort but clamped it shut. He wanted to point out that Philip's liberal interpretation of protocol was bordering on defiance, but found his reasoning disconcerting. "Just . . ." Patrick sighed. "Know that the crew might suspect something is wrong when surprise inspections pop up all over. Captain Alexander believes that by allowing the crew to follow their duties and commands without a high-ranking officer glaring over their shoulder . . . well, that it helps build trust."

Philip kept his frown a moment longer before nodding again. "I see your point. I may not agree with it, but this is Alexander's ship after all."

"Thank you," Patrick said, feeling a rush of prideful accomplishment.

The ONI Lieutenant's face smoothed back over to passive. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes." Patrick glanced down at his datapad and brought up his schedule. "There will be an official orientation in the Main Officers Lounge tomorrow. It's a simple meet-and-greet but one that Captain Alexander has deemed mandatory. Can I count on you being there?"

"Of course." Philip finally let a smile spread across his face and this time it seemed genuine.

Patrick eyed the Lieutenant carefully. Deep down he knew he couldn't bring himself to fully trust the ONI spook, but if he could at the very least have Philip develop a level of respect for what the Colonial Administration Authority was doing on Verent then Patrick could ease some of the tension forming around Philip. "Good. That is all."

"Good day, Endres," he said with a nod. Philip stepped aside and started for the lift lobby a few sections over.

Patrick took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He didn't bother turning around to watch the Lieutenant go; he could hear the soft click of the man's boots long after he disappeared around the corner.

He felt oddly at ease from his encounter with Philip. While shaky at first, he recovered and spoke with authority like he'd seen the Captain do many times before. He nodded satisfactorily to himself and turned to go.

But he paused in mid step to read the label on the door Philip had previously exited. Zero-G Equipment? Confused, Patrick ran his keycard through the reader and entered the dimly-lit room. Racks of various sizes lined the three walls in the narrow room, and as he stepped inside more lights flicked on to shine down on the rows of environmental suits and bulky repair tools. He traced his gaze over the entire room, wondering what it was that Philip had been doing in there. Maybe he is just doing an impartial ship inspection for ONI.

Stepping back into the small hallway and closing the door behind him, Patrick doubted that truly was the case.

* * *

><p>Security Officer Jacob Wilcox rechecked the power level on his shockstick for the third time that day and clamped it back onto his belt's holster. It wasn't that he was expecting trouble, but the repetitions came from a need to check the weapon's charge. Flicking the power toggle on and off was a nervous habit, and in previous occasions he found his shockstick unresponsiveâ€"a result of burning out the switchâ€"right when he needed to use the weapon to subdue a combatant.<p>

Settling himself, he kept an even pace down the portside corridor that hugged the outer hull of the ship. Farther up the stretch of grated floor and thick metal-plated walls he saw numerous, rounded protrusions at fifty meter intervals. At their apexes the convex shapes made the three meter-wide corridor into a narrow throughway, and it made Jacob curious of their purpose. While the long corridor was empty he couldn't help but feel somebody was watching him as he came to a stop at the first protrusion.

Jacob looked for a label or a datapad port, but found nothing with which to interface. Four large bolts held the giant cap-like structure to the hull and running down from the ceiling into the rounded objects were a trio of colored pipes: RED, BLUE, and BLACK. From his previous experience he knew that generally RED was power and BLUE was coolant, but he wasn't sure what BLACK was. He walked to the other side of the protrusion and finally found a small plate with the letters PDS inscribed into it. Ah, the Point Defense System.

He knew that the Spirit of Fire was getting a few upgrades but he didn't think the weapons systems would take priority over other, more obvious civilian needs. Jacob had heard that the CAA had not upgraded the 3rd generation Terra-Forming gear in an attempt to cut back costs, and yet they had nearly doubled their security team. At the same time, the UNSC had flipped the bill for adding more weaponry to the ship. It all was an odd handling of the resources. Is there something going on that they aren't telling us?

Jacob shrugged to himself and set off down the corridor, figuring the financial methods the CAA established were none of his business. Heading towards the bow, he marched down a short ramp and entered into the portion of the ship that made the Spirit of Fire a

Phoenix-class colony vessel. On both sides of the ship, where the dorsal portion of the hull extended out, a number of giant Firebases remained docked to the _Spirit of Fire_ until Captain Alexander ordered them down to the planet's surface. It was always impressive to see the modular structures hanging there, waiting to ride down into the atmosphere like some perched avian seeking out its prey. He stepped over to a T-junction with a small slit of a window and peered up at the underside of one of the Firebases, marveling at the engineering feat.

"Officer Wilcox?"

Jacob snapped his head around and found a pair of technicians walking towards him down a maintenance hallway that extended into the interior of the ship. He squinted his eyes, trying to focus on either person. "Yes?" he asked, his right hand dropping down to his shockstick.

The two techs came to halt in front of Jacob, the one on the left seeing his security weapon and pausing. The tech on the right gave him a wave. "Jacob, isn't it?"

He eyed the questioner closer and saw tendrils of long black hair falling out from underneath the woman's cap. He then read her name badge and smiled. "Miss Ackerman. Fancy meeting you here." He cringed at his choice of words. _What a lame thing to say_. He torn his gaze off of her pleasing returned smile and glanced over at the other tech that now seemed to be less on edge. "Mr. Collins," he greeted.

The male technician nodded while keeping his eyes on Jacob's shockstick. "Expecting trouble?"

Jacob laughed, purposely let go of his weapon, and folded his arms across his chest. "No, just making the rounds." He looked back over at Harper. "What brings you two here?"

Collins snorted. "Earth Procurement screwed us over, big time. Now we've got to manually enter in the Firebases' manifests for each unit."

"Ah," he said, remembering his supervisor updating the Security Team on Frasure's clearance request. "Sounds . . . time-consuming."

"It is," Harper answered. "We're luck it was only the Firebases."

"Lucky?" Collins blurted out, his freckled face scrunching up under curly red hair. "Well, I don't want to be any longer than I have to, so I'm going to start on my first batch." He flashed his credentials, stepped past Jacob, and headed towards the first maintenance hatch along the inner wall of the corridor.

Harper sighed and pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I better get started too."

"Would you like an escort?" Jacob asked a little too loudly, suddenly feeling teenage awkwardness all over again.

She made a face somewhere between a frown and a smile. "I doubt the walk will be that hazardous."

"Well, you never know," he said lightly, trying to inject some humor into the moment. "This section of the ship can be pretty dark and scary."

Harper's expression finally morphed into a complete grin and she brushed past him, letting out a soft chuckle.

Jacob's brow furrowed, trying to interpret the woman's manner, but as she quickly stretched the distance between them down the corridor, he followed in her wake with a noisy, boot-clopping jog. He hurried past Collins, who was halfway through his maintenance hatch, and joined Harper at her left side. "You have to admit, the odds of us running into each other again are pretty slim."

Harper gave him a sideways glare. "So what, you think that means fate has brought us together?"

What? "What? No, not at all. I mean, with all the personnel on this ship, for us to bump into each other has to be pretty rare."

"So you're following me," she stated.

He met her stare evenly. "Or vice-versa."

With her left hand she gave his right forearm a squeeze. "You don't have to try so hard, Officer Wilcox," she said, adding a bit of playfulness to her tone.

Jacob felt heat rise in him and he shook his head. "Sorry." A simple grasp of the arm from an attractive woman could send his thoughts off to fantasies unhindered and he let himself go with Harper Ackerman. While she may not have realized how Jacob took her subtle gesture as a show of possible mutual affection, he did have enough sense to quell his desires. _At least until I'm off duty_.

Harper held on for a moment longer before releasing her grip and saying, "okay."

They walked in silence together for another few paces before Jacob turned to her. "So what brings you out to Verent?" he asked as a default question. It seemed to be the norm and standard to see why people joined up on colony missions and he wondered what she was doing aboard the _Spirit of Fire_ as a caretaker for her niece. The warning to avoid Harper from Second Officer Philip was still in his mind, but he wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Oh, nothing much, really. Just robbed a depository, stole a woman's identity, and forged my colonial papers to get a job on the _Spirit of Fire_. You?"

"Uh . . ." Jacob paused, trying to properly read the relaxed way she had stated the answer. Philip's mention of the Ackermans' "trouble past" flashed through his mind. "You _are_ joking, right?"

She let out a lilting laugh that echoed down the corridor. "Of course." She leaned in and dropped her voice to a whisper. "I _stole_ the colonial papers."

Jacob smiled and laughed nervously.

Harper shook her head. "I was always bad at making jokes." She cleared her throat and sighed deeply. "No, there's always a reason one leaves Earth behind to help colonize a planet." She leaned in again. "I'm part of the tech team that's going to stay planet-side."

"Oh," Jacob said, feeling some of the hopes he had for their relationship evaporate in his mind's eye. "I still have another two years on my contract for the Security Detail, so I'll be returning to Earth after this project is done." He looked down at his closed hands and forced them open when he realized she hadn't answered his question. "So that's your angle? Being a productive member of colonial society?"

She hesitated and raised her chin in thought. "Not completely. I mean, yes, that's one reason, but for me and Juliana . . . we just needed to get away."

Jacob was about to ask her from whom or what, but she continued on.

"My family doesn't have the greatest reputation at this point," she murmured. "It's hard to find a job when every background check an employer does raises all kinds of red flags."

He smiled. "So you did forge your colonial papers."

"No," she quickly replied, drawing out the single-syllable word. "But I did burn up every favor I had in the CAA to get Juliana and me on this ship." She lowered her voice. "It's hard to get ahead in life when no one trusts you."

"Why don't people trust you?" But even as he automatically asked the question, he knew it was something he shouldn't have touched.

Harper visibly winced. "It's complicated." She sighed and slowed her pace to come to a stop near the fourth hatch on down the line. "Look, there's probably a lot about me that if you found out you'd never want to speak to me again. You seem like a nice guy, but I can't be vomiting my personal history on a security officer and expect to walk away clean."

Jacob frowned. "I'm not here to judge you, Ackerman."

Harper folded her arms across her chest and narrowed her eyes, as if trying to detect his honesty. But after a few seconds she closed her eyes and sighed. "I know, I know. I'm sorry, I just . . ." She trailed off and leaned back against the corridor wall. "Maybe after I'm off duty in a couple days we could talk, okay?"

"Yeah." A block of ice formed in his stomach and he felt that familiar feeling of rejection pulse out towards him. It generally happened when he had inserted his foot into his mouth and her abrupt end to the conversation had pretty much negated the promise of her last sentence. Why do I always smoother? He let his gaze drift downward. "I'll leave you be." He turned to go.

"Hey," Harper said gently. "Thank you for getting me talking, Officer Wilcox."

Jacob turned around and found her wearing an apologetic smile. "You can call me Jacob."

"As long as you call me Harper."

He grinned back at her. "Deal."

* * *

><p>Harper opened the small maintenance hatch and entered the confined passage way that would lead to Firebase F-05. Running on minimal power that fed from the Spirit of Fire, the dim running lights along the floor and low ceiling provided just enough illumination to find the adjacent hatch of F-05. She entered the proper code on the keypad and stepped through the Firebase's alternative entrance.

F-05 immediately felt like some long forgotten ghost ship. While there was enough oxygen circulating through the low-powered environmental system, it was still well below the average temperature and Harper shivered in the cold. Every fifth glowpanel was on and the only sounds were the hollow whooshing of air from the open hatch behind her. As soon as she locked it closed, there was silence.

She pulled out her datapad and brought up the Firebase's map, tracing her path to the central storage unit where she would get the first set of manifests_. And then it's only a matter of scanning each container_. She sighed out loud and the breath noise carried down the long, vacant hall. As she began to walk, her mind settled on the conversation she just had with Jacob Wilcox.

He seemed like a nice guy. Though awkward at times, he recovered well. Even his adolescent-like approach to conversation was cute_. And he is quite handsome_. She shook her head and turned the corner. His asking of why she was going to Verent appeared like a natural question but it immediately put her on the defensive. While he seemed innocent in asking, she couldn't help but feel a hint of suspicion in his voice. _He is a Security Officer after all_. Harper wasn't sure how much of her past she would be willing to discuss with Jacob, and yet she found herself wanting to tell him most of everything. It wasn't necessarily because it was a guy that she could see herself falling for, but the simple act of trusting someone for a change.

She just didn't know if _he_ would be willing to trust _her_.

Sighing once more and seeing her breath hover in the air in front of her, she turned down the last hallway and into the storage unit's entrance foyer. She keyed the double doors opened and the interior lights of the large room flickered on with full brightness. Harper nearly squinted but dialed down the intensity with a control panel on the wall. The stacks upon rows of containers mocked her with their silent presence as they begged to be cataloged. She pressed a few buttons on her datapad and brought up the inventory program to scan each crate, pallet, and container. It would be a tedious task, but it might also give her time to think about opening up more to Jacob.

Time to get to work.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

"Lead Technician Frasure didn't sound too happy with your request."

From his personal diminutive kitchenette area, Captain Alexander looked over at the smaller-scale AI pedestal positioned at the center of his cabin. Mnemosyne wore a lopsided grin and one eyebrow was raised. She was getting much better at displaying emotions and it helped Markus interact with her on a more casual basis. It wasn't that he didn't like the company of others, but sometimes people—like Endres—could become a little much. His XO, while entertaining around others, would often times hang around long after being dismissed.

Markus poured himself a small cup of tea from the flashpot and returned to his cushioned couch along the far wall. "Frasure always sounds upset. If it's not one thing it's another." He plopped down and sunk into the fabric.

"Should I add that to his psych profile?"

He smiled, shook his head, and took a sip of tea. The strong scent of peppermint filled his nostrils and he breathed it out carefully. While most Fleet captains had a cache of liquor in their cabinet, Alexander never quite acquired the taste of alcohol and instead indulged himself with the comforting draw of tea. He collected tea of every kind—even the rare homebrews from colonies like Skopje—and yet he didn't consider himself a tea connoisseur. He tried nearly everything available but only drank what he liked.

Markus placed his cup on the arm of the couch. "What's the latest Cryo Chamber numbers?"

Mnemosyne straightened up. "Exact or estimate?"

"Estimate."

"Nearly 68 percent of the civilians are already sealed in and only 12 percent of the crewmembers."

He nodded. It was amazing progress, considering the last colony mission took nearly two weeks for the Cryo Rooms to be filled. Mnemosyne's integration into the timetables and quartermaster's logs definitely proved to speed up the process, and Markus was grateful for her efficiency. "What would we do without you, Nemmy?"

The AI crossed her fingers together and lowered her hands to rest on the waist of her green gown. "That sounds like a loaded question, Captain. Are you sure you want me to answer that?"

Markus rolled his eyes. "Nevermind."

"Very well." She watched him for a moment longer, silently blinking. A few missions back Markus would have considered her unwavering

presence a bit unnerving, but in a way it helped ground him in reality. He knew it wasn't something as symbiotic as a _real_ relationship, but the AI offered a constant soundboard with which Markus bounced ideas off of. Her personality had evolved since her very first integration into the _Spirit of Fire_, and she was becoming more likable the longer he talked with her. He didn't know the details of her origin, but he knew Mnemosyne was a sort of hybrid AI. Not quite a Smart AI, but also no dummy. It was a series scientists had tried and tested to outlast the 7 year life-span of the higher-tier AIs, and Mnemosyne would remain at full functionality for another five yearsâ€”according to lab projections.

Markus sighed and took another drink of tea. A wave of uneasiness washed over him as the sad reality of having an AI as his closest companion set in. As soon as his career took off he told himself he would begin the process of starting a family once he'd spent a few years getting his "ship legs." But as months passed and opportunities arose he found the majority of his time was spent aboard ships and ports of call. He wasn't the type of guy that would seek out one-night stands, so the search for an honest mate was never something he could do. And now, as he approached his late 30's, he realized his chance to enjoy a family life was passing him by. His first priority would be to find a member of the opposite sex and begin the courting process. _But where would I start? And how?_ Markus shook his head and knew he was getting way ahead of himself.

"Are you alright, Captain?" Mnemosyne asked, breaking the silence.

"I'm fine," he murmured, suddenly feeling tired. "I think I'll go to bed early tonight." He sensed the AI's concerned look and sat up. "I'll be fine, Nemmy, really. I'm . . . just feeling my age."

The AI frowned and shifted her weight to her left leg. "You're not _that_ old, Mark."

The use of his first name made him look up at her. The AI's expression resembled one he found his aunt wearing when he had told her of his intentions to enter the Naval Academy. Mnemosyne had even duplicated the slight taunting of the flesh around her eyes and it made Markus feel like he was back in his aunt's kitchen all over again. _"What about what your father would want for you? Hmm? Or your mother; what would she say?"_ Aunt Caroline had said. He argued back then that they'd want him to be happy, but their hidden hope was for him to carry on the family business and marry Evangeline Wright. He sighed. That _seems like a lifetime ago_.

He stood abruptly, causing the memory to evaporate in his mind. He cleared his thoughts fully and smiled at the AI. _Here is where I'm supposed to be. I'm not going to doubt the good that I've done to salve some ache of a path I could have chosen_. "Nemmy, have the orderly prepare my dress uniform. Tomorrow's going to be a day of new beginnings for a lot of people." _Including me_.

* * *

><p>Jonathan Philip stepped into the Main Officers Lounge and immediately felt off balance. He was expecting the room to be filled with extravagant creature comforts and tables full of gourmet

delicacies, but instead he found the exact opposite. Along the left and right walls of the rectangular room were small rounded tables supporting trays of finger foods that were more to snack on than to dine on. Mostly everyone was standing, conversing in small groups, while others sat on the semicircle couch that framed a central holopad—which was currently displaying a montage of images from the Spirit of Fire's previous colony plants. The room was more functional than it was comfortable, and Jonathan almost stepped back into the hallway to escape the crowded lounge.

"Ah, Second Officer Philip." XO Endres detached himself from a huddle of chattering men and greeted him with a small glass of red liquid. "Good to see you here."

Philip tugged at the ends of his sleeves and nodded. "Well, this is a mandatory meeting." He tried to read deception in the XO's expression and knew the man could just have been faking his smile.

"Yes, well there are people I'd like you to meet." Endres waved him over to the group he had just left and Philip followed. The XO started the introductions with the grey-haired man to Philip's right. "This is Franklin Rivers, the Chief Mechanic."

"Call me Frank," he added, shaking Philip's hand with a calloused one of his own.

Endres pointed to the dark-skinned man in the middle who wore a military-style cut uniform. "This is Thomas Glass, head of Security."

With broad shoulders and a strong build, Glass commanded respect by his sheer presence. "Welcome aboard," he said in a deep, resonant rumbling from his chest. Philip could easily believe Glass was capable of snapping anyone in the room in half. His large hand nearly engulfed Philip's in a handshake.

"And here is Chief Colony Engineer Daniel Wolfe," Endres introduced the last man.

The middle-aged engineer shook his hand and winked one of his blue eyes at Philip. "Despite what they may tell you, I'm not only good for colony plants." He poked a thumb at the first man. "I've been known to rival Rivers' mechanical skills."

The Chief Mechanic barked out a laugh. "I'd like to see you do a field repair on a hull breach in orbit."

Endres raised an eyebrow. "You mean like your Refresher Station fiasco on our last colony mission?"

Rivers grinned. "Hey, that sealant would have held if the manufacturer's specs gave the proper PSI range." He cupped his left hand over his right fist and quickly lifted it away, making an explosion sound effect. "Malcolm was completely covered in that crap."

Philip joined the four men in laughter as he pictured the Third Officer's unfortunate event in his mind.

"Where is Malcolm?" Glass asked, looking above the heads of others.

Endres shrugged. "He volunteered to remain on the bridge. I'm going to swap with him halfway through this little shindig."

Rivers nodded slowly in mockingly overt approval. "How noble."

Engineer Wolfe tilted his head towards Philip. "Wait, how did you get out of that duty?"

He exchanged a glance with Endres and wondered how to respond.

But the XO took a minute step forward and held up a hand. "This is Philip's first time on the Spirit of Fire. The Captain thinks his time would best be spent getting to know those he's going to work with." He let a smile tug at the corner of his mouth and looked at Glass. "Even if they are a bunch of UNSC rejects."

"Ouch," Glass chuckled. "He's referring to my stint in the Marine Corps."

"You were in the Marines?" Philip asked.

He nodded. "Back on Tribute in the Epsilon Eridani System I was with the group that brought down that Insurrectionist terror plot to bomb the Capitol Building in June, 2512. Some political hack didn't like the way we left blood stains on the carpet or something stupid like that and I left with an honorable discharge."

Philip's eyes grew wide when he recalled the ONI reports. "You were on Tribute?"

"Born and raised there." He looked down at his glass and wiped some of the condensation away distractedly. "Though I hear the Innies are gaining some ground again."

"Well, you guys did a hell of a job," Philip commented, gaining new respect for Glass. The terror plot had been foiled by a lot of Red Tape cutting, and in the end it left a lot of uneasiness for the CAA officials. He was about to touch on one of the operational details but caught himself before he could open his mouth. Stick to your cover; you're not an ONI op here. He figured he could talk to Glass afterward.

"So what brings you out here, Philip?" Wolfe asked. "The lure of excitement? Did some female civilian woo you on board?"

Feeling back on balance, he smiled. "Partially the former and none of the latter." Beside him, Endres turned to face him, and Philip wondered if the XO would inform them of his true ONI nature. "This is my first colony mission and hopefully not the last."

Rivers frowned. "Not many worlds left to colonize." He harrumphed. "At least none that the CAA can afford."

"There are still a few more systems the UNSC has probed," Philip offered. His generic cover story to the crew was to be an officer looking to climb the ranks to a captaincy, but even as he forced his

story of false hopes he wondered if Endres would drop the hammer and tell the gathered men about his ONI affiliation. "Maybe by the time we get back the Earth there will be a bureaucratic compromise and ships like the _Spirit of Fire_ can continue to do what they do best." He looked the XO square in the face and almost wanted the truth to come out, but apparently Endres was a strict adherer to Captain Alexander's wishes. It was unexpected.

Endres' eyes seemed to soften and he sighed. "A toast then," he prompted, raising his glass. "To the Wild, Great Beyond. May our thirst for exploration never cease."

As the five of them drank, Wolfe eyed Endres. "Since when did you become so eloquent?"

The XO lowered his drink and smiled. "Sometimes you have to rise above your material . . . and your audience."

As they laughed again, Philip couldn't help but feel a bond slowly forming with them. These men were just like anyone else wanting to make a difference in the galaxy. They were pleasant company, and even Endres proved he wasn't normally the nervous shadow he ran into yesterday down in the bowels of the ship. Deep down Philip knew any relationship he might form with crewmembers was trite and he should look upon them as pawns and nothing more.

But as the night went on and he met more individuals, he found the _Spirit of Fire_'s crew not to be like the stuck-up politicians or CAA Chamber Members he had previously encountered. It was as if the intel on the crew had been heavily biased, and he discovered that the majority of them didn't loath the UNSC at all. Many found the United Nations Space Command to be a necessity and they seemed to understand the slow transition of the Colonial Administration Authority's dissolving influence in the outer colonies.

A clanking of metal on glass brought his attention to the front of the room and the crowd hushed. Captain Alexander stood beaming in his white uniform and wore a proud smile. "I wanted to thank you all for your efforts to get to know one another." He leaned forward and placed his glass on the holopad table. "We're winding down the first leg of our trip to Verent, but keep in mind the duties you have waiting for you after your thaw from Cryo. So for now, enjoy this lull in chaos, and prepare yourself for some hard work left to be done." He picked up his glass and raised it. "And let's make Verent be the best colony it can be."

The crowd agreed with a triumphant "hear, hear" and light applause broke out. Philip patted the outside of his cup-wielding hand with his left and nodded in mock approval. He was certain Verent would become a colonyâ€”just not how Alexander may think. He grumbled to himself. While all of the hobnobbing was going on, Philip had let his mind wander away from his mission parameters. He was fairly certain the charm of the crew wouldn't get to him and he tried to harden his heart for good measure.

A ping from his comm jolted him out of his contemplation and he fished the device from his pocket. The tiny yellow light on the unit flashed on and off, telling him he had an alert sent from his datapad back in his private quarters. He frowned and returned the comm to his pocket. He looked up to find Endres but the XO must have stepped up

to his right side when he was distracted with his comm. "Oh, there you are." He set his glass down on the table to his left. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll retire for the day."

Patrick Endres consulted his wrist chrono and frowned. "This early?"

He placed a hand on his stomach and grimaced. "I don't think the hors d'oeuvres settled well with me."

"Yes, I noticed several others feeling a bit queasy."

"Yeah." Philip leaned in and his face tightened. "I wanted to thank you for your discretion earlier. If others learned that I was anâ€" "

"I did it for their sakes, Philip," Endres cut him off, his posture going rigid. "The less they know about you, the better it is for all of us." He shook his head. "I just hope that you've seen how serious the crew takes this mission. Success is their goal; it is in their blood."

Philip nodded. "I understand." And he truly did.

"Then I will see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," he confirmed. He nodded and received one in return.

Weaving his way through the crowd, he was out the main door and onto a lift in a matter of seconds. He had decided against bringing his datapad to the party and his instincts had played him right. _Endres could have easily looked over my shoulder at any time. He's sneaky, alright_. The comm unit's yellow light flash pattern told him it was a priority alert and he wondered what exactly had happened. When the lift stopped on his deck level, he marched down the short hall to his quarters and entered. He found his datapad where he had left it, on the countertop of his refresher room. His eyes traced over the rest of his quarters, looking for a sign of intrusion, but everything was exactly as he had left it. Even the pair of socks that hung from a drawer was still lined up perfectly with his boots.

He picked up the datapad, entered his security code, and brought up the alert. It was an automated response when one of his ONI supply containers was being tampered with. _It better not be that idiot Parkins down in Storage_. He touched the screen and followed the link to the initial logger: H. Ackerman. Philip's eyes widened. "So it's you," he whispered to himself. "Your luck just keeps getting worse."

He brought his datapad into the main living area and plugged it into the holopad on the low table in front of a pair of not-so-comfortable chairs. As he linked into the main AI hub, using his ONI bypass decryption, he let a smile spread across his face. He could do any number of things to stop Ackerman's meddling but he chose the one method that would serve multiple purposes.

* * *

><p>The negative tone from her scanner snapped Harper Ackerman out of

her daze. She sat cross-legged at the base of a rack of crates, scooting along on a crawler she had found in a maintenance locker. She was nearly finished with her last batch when her datapad's stream halted and the scanner froze. She looked curiously at the device and noticed the readout in big red letters flash: ERROR.<p>

Frowning, Harper tried to scan the crate again but the message came back the same. She leaned forward to examine the Data Matrix Code etched into the crate's side panel and ran her fingers over the black and white barcode. When some of the black smeared together with the white she inhaled sharply, feeling the sting of the cold air. _What the hell?_ Harper ran her fingers over the previous crate and found a solid plastic coating over the barcode, unlike the unprotected crate her scanner couldn't read.

She touched the activator on her headset and called a fellow technician. "Hey Collins, you still over on F-07?"

A static hiss filled her left ear followed by a grumpy voice. "Yeah, I'm on my last dozen containers. You got a problem on 05?"

"Maybe. A crate I just scanned has an invalid Data Matrix Code, and the barcode itself looks like it wasn't even flash-sealed but almost painted on. Does that make any sense?"

"You mean Procurement screwed up something else?" His sigh sounded like sandpaper rubbing against stone. "Try entering the number manually. You remember how to read Data Matrix?"

"Of course," she replied without thinking. It was one of the first things they taught in Tech school, but it had been years since putting it into practice. "Hold on."

"I'm holdin'," he said distractedly.

Harper started deciphering the hieroglyphic order of black and white squares and found the twenty digit code-reading method to come back to her in an instant. She entered each number into her scanner in sequence and once she had the full code she pressed ACCEPT. But again, the scanner blurted out a tone other than the positive chime she had been hearing since yesterday. She looked at the scanner's readout and frowned. "Classified?"

"You get it figured out?" Collins' tiny voice came through her headset.

"Maybe," she said. Harper rubbed her tired eyes with thumb and forefinger. "Have you come across any containers marked as 'Classified'?"

"Nope. Call it in, if you want. I'm almost done here." Collins kept the line open and added, "do you need me to take a look at it?"

"No, I'll figure something out." She switched off her comm and got to her feet. Harper walked back to the front of the room where the room's only terminal was attached to the wall. She had been using it to keep a backup manifest for her scanner, as she was updating the list every two hours, but until now she had not connected to the _Spirit of Fire_'s central computer hub.

She logged in under her technician username and password and pulled up the master list that every tech had attributed to. She whistled when she saw the progress of her fellow techs as they had accomplished over 90 percent of the DME fix. She searched the list for 'Classified' and found no units that matched. Linking her datapad to the terminal, she started the upload of her last batch.

Within seconds of the upload, the terminal screen momentarily flashed red and her datapad finished the process after sending the data of the classified crate. Frowning, Harper reconnected and tried the upload again, but a halt in the system froze her data stream. Growling in frustration, she tried using the direct, automated transfer of her datapad's contents to the ship's manifest, bypassing the screening filters, in an attempt to figure out the mysterious contents of the crate. It was a gray area of risky security protocols, but she had to know

Before she could even submit the request, the terminal's screen was filled with a two-dimensional image of the AI Mnemosyne. "Technician Specialist Ackerman, I notice you are trying to upload into the _Spirit of Fire_'s Firebase Master Manifest List. Is there a reason you are retrying your attempt to connect?"

Confusion rippled across Harper's face. "How did you . . . why can't I . . ." She sighed, knowing the AI probably noticed her backdoor move to find out more about the crate. "Why can't I access Firebase F-05, Lot 34 in the Master Manifest List?"

"Please specify a container."

"It's the only one with a 'Classified' label on it," Harper murmured.

Mnemosyne raised one of her eyebrows. "Data Code 85971505-186473-7814350 is marked CLASSIFIED and requires an Office of Naval Intelligence Code Key to access its contents. You do not have the proper clearance."

_ONI Code Key? What are ONI crates doing aboard a Firebase? And on the _Spirit of Fire_?_ Harper's thoughts spun around in a circle, almost making her dizzy with confusion. Having military-grade hardware on a colony vessel wasn't anything new, but stowing secret crates was something that should raise a few alarms. _Shouldn't it?_ Harper frowned at Mnemosyne. "Can you alert the Deck Officer of this container?"

The AI shook her head. "That will not be necessary. ONI protocol D-17-42N states that the local head of ONI Operations will be notified of this incident."

Harper's jaw dropped. "What? Mnemosyne, this is a _civilian_ ship. There is no local head of ONI Ops."

"Be that as it may, you still do not have the clearance to access the classified contents."

She shook her head. "Frasure's going to freak out about this."

"Is there anything else you require?" the AI asked.

Harper waved her hand. "No," she sighed. "I'll finish up here soon and report to Lead Tech Frasure."

"Very well, Miss Ackerman." The AI's avatar winked out and the terminal returned to normal.

Feeling more confused than frustrated, Harper slowly walked back to the last few crates left to scan. The AI's sudden appearance seemed a bit odd to her. _Why would Mnemosyne go out of her way to confront me?_ True, the AI could have simply denied Harper access and report the incident to Frasure and even Alexander. It made her head hurt.

She returned to her last few minutes of work and was just about to submit the last crate to her datapad when her comm beeped. It was Frasure. "Yes, sir?"

"Ackerman, get your ass back here ASAP," Frasure growled. "I need you to explain some things to me and the Second Officer."

Nervousness sent a chill through her skull. "Yes, sir."

* * *

><p>"I'm sorry for the mishap, Second Officer Philip. I'm sure there will be no more problems on our end." Frasure rose from behind his desk and nodded to Philip. "My apologies for your having to come down here."<p>

"No need," Philip said with a soft smile. He looked over at Harper Ackerman as she stood along the wall in the hot, tiny office. Sweat pasted loose strands of hair across her forehead. "I'm sure Tech Spec Ackerman knows now how to follow the proper channels when presenting an inquiry." He watched with satisfaction as the woman's face began a slow transformation from a frown into a snarl. "The ship's AI is only to be used for those with . . . pressing needs."

Harper snapped her head around to look at Frasure. "Sir, I'm telling you that Mnemosyne contacted _me_."

Frasure shook his head and wiped a bead of sweat from under his nose. "Regardless, it's not your place to do an in-depth search in the Master Manifest List just to prove a theory."

She folded her arms across her chest. "It wasn't a theory, sir. The crate was labeled CLASSIFIED, and I didn't thinkâ€"

"That's right," Frasure said, cutting her off. "You didn't think." He pointed to the datapad on his desk. "The Data Code of the crate checks out. You may think you saw it say 'classified,' but there's nothing out of the ordinary with it." He snorted and held up the datapad for her to see it. "It's clearly labeled in the system as FOODSTUFFS."

"But my scanner said CLASSIFIED!"

Philip held up his hands before Frasure could give a reprimand. "I'm sure it was merely an equipment error." He smiled at Ackerman who was on the verge of turning red. She was obviously infuriated over the accusation he was making. "I won't log this as a 'breach of

security,' but keep in mind, Frasure, that another incident like this will not be tolerated."

"I completely understand." Frasure's cold stare met Ackerman's evenly. "It won't happen again." He returned his gaze to Philip. "Should I report this to the Captain?" he asked, his voice calm once more.

Ackerman's eyes dashed to Philip's, trying to gauge his response and perhaps wondering if she should attack him now to prevent further damage to her reputation. Instead, Philip shook his head. "That won't be necessary. I'm sure Tech Spec Ackerman's initial intentions were benevolent." He watched as the woman's face slackened, and then her shoulders slumped in defeat. _Yes, a fine scapegoat indeed_. "You may transfer the complete DME Report to Captain Alexander once you have the entire Master Manifest List complete, but you can leave out this incident."

Frasure straightened up. "It will be finished within the hour."

"Very good." Philip gave an abbreviated nod and left the office. He kept himself from smiling even after he entered the lift at the end of the hall. He could imagine the grilling Frasure was giving Ackerman, and part of him wanted to stick around to watch the show.

His goal had been to test his ONI override codes on the ship's AI, allowing him to test Mnemosyne's compliance level with his orders. _And it worked perfectly_. He was certain the CAA had no idea about the ONI imbedded coding inside the AI's programming, and using it for the first time against an unsuspecting tech was the perfect trial run. It also went along with his plan to build up suspicion against Ackerman. She truly was a pawn.

And Philip had made the first move.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Jacob Wilcox entered the nearly vacant Mess Hall and searched for any familiar face. It was late in the evening and the only people still around were second shift personnel that had barely caught the galley before it closed. He had been alone and on his feet for nearly 12 hours straight and for once he felt like a little human interaction would do him some good. He saw a pair of mechanics wearing soiled coveralls and a dozen more crewmembers scattered throughout the Mess Hall, finishing up their meals.

Then he saw Harper Ackerman seated at the back of the room, looking as glum as possible without visibly moping. She had changed out of her tech spec uniform and was now wearing a gray jumpsuit more akin to a Pelican pilot. Her long black hair was in a loose knot and her green eyes stared blankly into the bowl of cold soup in front of her. "Hey," Jacob greeted, stepping to her table.

Without lifting her head, Harper raised her eyes under arched eyebrows and sighed. "Hey," she muttered.

He watched her closely as he took the chair across from her. "Are you okay?"

Her face soured and she looked over to the galley. "Looks like you just missed the kitchen closing. Now all you can get is that vending machine junk."

Jacob frowned at her demeanor, wondering why she was being so dismal. "Hey, Harper." When she looked up and blinked, some of the tightness in her face relaxed. "What's going on?" he tried once again.

She gently placed her spoon down in the untouched bowl and pushed her tray off to the side. "I'm on Disciplinary Leave, that's what's going on," she said quietly and with a coating of bitterness. She sighed again, this time in obvious anger, and reached behind to loosen her hair from the elastic tie. Her long black hair was oily and dirty as it fell in a clump over her right shoulder. Even a pair of days without a shower couldn't detract too much from her natural beauty, and Jacob found himself staring into her weary eyes.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Harper shrugged, making the effort look nearly beyond her current strength, but she reluctantly gathered her hands together and leaned forward. "I don't think I should say anything to a security officerâ€"no offense."

"What? Why should that matter?" He leaned his head forward, trying to look through her invisible wall of emotional hardness. The fact that she had not crossed her arms told him she wasn't totally shutting him out but that it would take an effort to get her to open up. "Hey, remember when you said we could talk after you were finished with your shift?"

"That was before all this happened." She let her gaze drift downward then across the room at anyone that could be within earshot. Her dark eyebrows hooded her eyes, as if she was adding another layer of protection. "But can I trust you?"

"Absolutely," he answered with a nod, feeling his heart beat just a little faster.

She gave him a flat smile and took a deep breath before she talked. "Do you ever get the feeling like the whole worldâ€"the whole galaxy is against you?"

Jacob snorted. "Yeah. I remember this one time, back during officer training, when an instructorâ€"

"Jacob," she interrupted. "Just . . . let me talk, okay?"

His face flushed red. "Sorry."

"S'okay." She scooted forward and her mouth opened for a few seconds before speaking. "You know how I was performing data maintenance on one of the firebases?"

"Yeah. A DMA error or something, right?"

"Data Manifest Error, yes. Well, I had spent nearly two days scanning all of the supply containers when on my last batch I came across a crate that was labeled: CLASSIFIED." She scratched at her left temple. "The matrix code on the crate wasn't even real. I mean, I had to enter it in manually, but it looked like it was stamped on."

"It was a fake barcode?" Jacob's brow furrowed. "But it did read in the system."

Harper nodded. "When I queried the _Spirit of Fire_'s central computer, Mnemosyne interrupted my request and . . ." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "She said that the local head of the Office of Naval Intelligence would be informed of the incident."

"ONI?" Jacob's eyes grew wide and he ran a hand through his hair. "Why would ONI secretly put a supply container on a firebase on a colony vessel?"

"You think ONI put that crate on board?"

He nodded. "If we can go by what Mnemosyne said. My guess would be that either ONI stowed it there or somebody can slice into the system and mark crates as they want to hide their true contents."

"That's pretty much what I was accused of," she growled.

"What?"

"Frasure, my boss, said I was accessing files I wasn't supposed to. He's placed me on disciplinary leave until we reach Verent. And even then, I'm not sure I'll have any credibility left."

He winced. "Were you slicing in illegally?"

Harper's eyes narrowed and she worked her jaw. "All I tried was to upload my datapad's manifest list into the ship's computer and the AI stopped me. It's not technically wrong, just not as secure as Frasure likes."

"Oh."

"But the crazy thing is this: when I gave him the barcode number on the crate, Frasure entered it into the system and it came up as FOODSTUFFS." She shook her head. "How is that possible?"

Jacob waited a while before responding. He looked into her worried eyes, reading the plea for reassurance that she wasn't going crazy. The most reasonable explanation he could think of was that Harper had entered in the data code wrong. _Then again, the barcode might not have been legit in the first place_. "Could somebody have updated the label in the system or something?"

Harper raised her head. "Yeah, but it would have to be someone with high-level security clearance."

"Or a good slicer." His eyes drifted upward, recalling a news report a few years back. "Did you ever hear about the Crystal City heist?"

"No, why?"

"Well, that colony has always been teetering on war and lawlessness, and a while ago there was a group of Insurrectionists that did something similar. An Innie slicer was able to falsify shipping manifests for a UNSC warehouse near the capital city's spaceport. They were able to sneak several cargo trailers aboard a dozen different freighters outbound for other garrisons on Crystal." He lowered his voice to just above a whisper. "But what the authorities didn't know is that the oversized cargo containers had six-man teams of Innies hiding inside, and once the freighters were clear of the spaceport they busted out and hijacked the ships. It was well coordinated and they made off with a lot of UNSC surplus."

One of Harper's eyebrows rose. "So you think the crate I found was put there by Insurrectionists?"

He shrugged. "I'm not going to say for sure but it's possible." Jacob stirred in his chair. "What are the odds that Earth Procurement's screw-up wasn't an accident?"

"You think Innies did all of this to hide one crate? Seems a bit overkill to me. And besides," she opened her hands and spread them wide. "How could they bring down the Spirit of Fire with a squad of commandos?" She let a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. "Security seems pretty tight to me."

"Thanks for the confidence booster," he muttered, "but I think I should report this to the head of security, Thomas Glass. Innies or ONI or whatever, that crate should be dealt with."

"Wait." Harper's hand quickly grabbed onto Jacob's right forearm before he could stand. "Please, don't say anything. I'm already in a big mess as it is and I don't want to drag you into this."

Jacob frowned, reading the worried expression her face suddenly took on. "It'll be okay. Glass will know how to handle this."

"Please," she pleaded, her voice nearly breaking. "The Second Officer already knows."

"Philip?" Jacob blurted out and abruptly stood. "How did he get involved?"

"Keep your voice down," she hissed, pulling him back into his seat. "He was in Frasure's office when I was called in." Harper let go of his arm. "He said he wouldn't report it to the Captain, but does that even matter now?" She winced. "I mean, I'll probably be sent back to Earth on the first transport out of Verent."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Jacob tried to sooth. "I'm sure it will blow over. Once they realize how much they need skilled technicians you'll be back into the swing of things."

Harper slowly perked up hesitantly. "You think so?"

As he nodded, he tried to give her a brave smile, but deep down he wasn't sure of anything. The punishment didn't seem to fit the accused crime, and with a mysterious crate being overlooked by a technicality . . . it made the hairs on the back of Jacob's neck

tingle with uncertainty. If he had doubts before about Philip, this latest incident sure set off the suspicious itch in Jacob's mind.

Harper smiled back. "Thanks for talking," she said with eyes that suddenly appeared tired.

"Just promise me you won't get into any more trouble," Jacob half-joked. "And if you need anything, let me know, okay?"

Harper drummed her fingers on the tabletop for a moment before finally sighing and standing. "Okay. Goodnight, Officer."

He looked up at her. "Sleep well, Tech Spec."

She gave his shoulder a gentle but firm squeeze and left.

He turned and looked over his right shoulder, watching her feminine gait turn the corner and out of view. Jacob sighed and glanced over at Harper's uneaten meal, tempted by its sustenance but repulsed by its temperature. Even though his stomach was growling he didn't feel much like eating. The uneasiness from hunger coupled with his misgivings of the Second Officer, and he pulled the tray over. In his line of work suspicion was considered a healthy device, but Jacob also knew, in this instance, that it had to be directed and harnessed. Calling out the third-in-command was a risk he might have to take.

If not for Harper, then for the crew of the Spirit of Fire.

* * *

><p>Patrick Endres watched the cargo bay's overseer point out the various sections of the bay to the quartet of senior officers standing outside Parkins' windowed office. Captain Alexander stood in front, flanked by Endres to his right and Lieutenant Philip and Third Officer Malcolm to his left. Whether Alexander's decision to begin inspections was to circumvent Philip's own, Patrick didn't know, but it did allow the four men to participate in activity together.<p>

"You see, once we begin the colony supply shipments, we'll be able to grab entire lots and send them down, instead of taking individual crates from each batch and gathering them on a pallet large enough to load up," Parkins explained over the din of haulers moving various containers behind him.

David Malcolm shook his head. "In our last colony mission debriefing on Earth, I had brought up the idea of transporting a space elevator to link to a tether station." The balding, beard-wearing man snorted. "It sure would have made transportation a lot easier."

Parkins agreed with an emphatic nod. "Sure would."

Captain Alexander waved away the idea. "The cost of something like that would have put the CAA way over budget for this mission. And the firebases do an amazing job of getting the foundations of a colony in place."

"I heard there was some trouble with those," Parkins mentioned with a

hint of nervousness. Endres figured Parkins didn't want anything else on his plate by the way his face paled. "Some major inventory screw up or something?"

Alexander nodded. "Frasure's crew has it taken care of."

Out of the corner of his left eye, Endres saw Philip flinch. He turned his head minutely and saw the ersatz Second Officer's jaw tightened almost undetectably. Confused by this reaction, Endres catalogued Philip's mannerism away for later recall.

"Well, that's a relief." Parkins wiped his sweaty palms off on his pant legs. "Then we're still on schedule, down here."

"That is good to hear," the Captain said approvingly. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Parkins."

"My pleasure, sir."

The four officers returned to the lift they came down on and Endres keyed in their destination. As the double doors closed, he looked over at Captain Alexander but focused on Philip. "What do you think, about time to close up shop?"

The Captain nodded. "Mnemosyne now has every civilian in Cryo with all other non-essential personnel scheduled for tomorrow."

Malcolm whistled. "I forgot how fast time flies in the Slipstream." He lifted his chin. "How would you like the rest of your staff to proceed?"

"Well . . . any volunteers?"

Endres felt his eyes narrow out of reflex at Philip. Captain Alexander was offering any one of them to take the first months-long shift of having a head Officer man the bridge, in case of an emergency. Patrick knew it would be unwise to leave Philip unattended, and he figured the Lieutenant would try to weasel his way out of staying in a cryo room if he could.

So it came as a complete shock when Philip leaned forward and nodded. "If it's alright with you, Captain, I'll head to Cryo."

Patrick couldn't help but hide his astonishment and it earned him a look from Malcolm.

"By all means," Alexander offered. "Though I believe I'll join you on the bridge during the last portion of the flight. Show you the ropes, so to speak. Wouldn't you agree, Endres?"

"Yes, sir." Patrick forced a smile. _So Markus is being cautious with Philip. Good_. Patrick had voiced his misgivings about Philip to the Captain, and it seems Markus had taken them to heart.

Malcolm frowned. "Am I missing something?"

Endres' smile went tight. _David must not know about Philip's ONI affiliation_. While he didn't agree with keeping Malcolm out of the loop, he understood the Captain's desire for containing such information. _David_ has _been known to fly off the handle with

matters like these_. "Nothing, Malcolm. Philip's still getting acquainted with the ship." He turned to the shorter man. "You want the first leg of the trip?"

The Third Officer shook his head. "You take it. The second leg is always the quietest," he said with a grin.

Endres snorted_. Hmm. I wonder how true that will be_.

The lift came to a stop and the doors parted. Philip stepped out and turned around. "I'll head to my cryo-pod after I finish up a few analysis reports."

Patrick was about to follow Philip to make sure he would be true to his word, but Alexander held up a hand to forestall him. Markus turned halfway around. "Malcolm, I believe you still have a datacard with Verent's seasonal climate estimates?"

"Yes. You want that _now_?" he asked, sounding slightly confused at the request.

"If you don't mind. You can pick up Philip's reports and drop them off to Endres on the bridge." The Captain spoke with a calm collectiveness that undermined the awkward atmosphere.

Malcolm shuffled past Endres. "Okay then. Second Officer Philip, shall we?"

Philip gave an abbreviated nod, looking a little stiffer than usual. "Then I'll be waiting for Mnemosyne to wake me when you require."

As the two lower ranking officers left, Endres closed the doors and the lift head upwards again. "Pinning Philip in place, sir?"

Alexander sighed, finally letting some of his fatigue show on his face. "I doubt he'll be much trouble the rest of the way to Verent."

Patrick's eyes widened. "You plan on keeping him in Cryo until we get there?"

"As much as I'd like to, no. But I'll have Mnemosyne monitor his comings and goings when we can't be there to watch him."

"He's not going to man the bridge by himself, is he? Even with the ship's AI, he wouldn't know the first thing aboutâ€"

"He won't, don't worry. I just don't want to give him any reasons to take ownership in his 'appointed' title." Alexander ran a hand over his face. "I don't know, Pat. He seems to be okay. He's actually given me pretty decent input to streamline some of our personnel processes, _and_ he's kept pace with the reports I've asked him for."

Endres shrugged. "Those crew logs fill themselves out. I still think he's up to something."

"Has he done anything suspicious?"

"Maybe. I caught him snooping around in one of the equipment rooms a while back, but other than that he's kept his nose clean."

The Captain frowned. "What was he doing down there?"

"No clue. I didn't find anything out of place. He could have been lost, but . . ." Endres growled, feeling his frustration brew like coffee in a flashpot. "I just don't trust him."

"Well, he won't be an issue for the next several months."

The lift doors chimed opened and the Captain stepped into the hallway that would lead to his private cabin. "The ship is yours, Pat. I'll see you when we're a few weeks out."

Endres snapped to attention and saluted. "I'll take good care of her, sir."

"I know."

As the doors closed, Patrick felt a shallowness form in his chest. It wasn't from the responsibility of command being placed upon his shoulders but from a healthy fear that Philip would be even more trouble when they reach Verent. He was hoping the Captain would see that maintaining the falsehood of Philip as the Second Officer to keep the crew calm could backfire if they ever learn the truth about the ONI spook. Since Verent was in such an isolated system, the next vessel after _the Spirit of Fire_ to reach the planet won't arrive for several months afterâ€"and that ship was usually a light freighter whose sole purpose was to make sure the colony was underway and report back to the CAA.

Patrick Endres sighed and wondered how confident everyone else was feeling. When the lift stopped and the doors opened, he headed for the bridge, pushing aside his anxiety.

* * *

><p>Jonathan Philip entered his private quarters, relieved to finally be rid of the bland nature of Third Officer Malcolm. His cabin was only across the hall from Philip's and yet the man found a way to prolong the moment it took to receive the few datacards Philip had in hand. After a mostly one-sided conversation, Malcolm left and Philip breathed a little easier.<p>

From Philip's estimation, the Third Officer didn't know of his ONI connection. It seemed odd to Philip that the Captain and the XO had not told Malcolm the truth. _That can work to my advantage too_.

While his task was monumental, Philip had laid the groundwork for his mission to succeed. He still had two options to take: one was more subtle and manipulative, while the other would definitely cause panic and, most likely, death. He wanted to avoid the latter as much as possibleâ€"ONI was never happy with civilian casualties. Usually Deffin could blame the loss of life on Insurrectionists, but that excuse had been overused too many times in the past.

Now to verify a few last things . . . Expelling a long breath, Philip flipped on his holopad and took a seat in the center of his

couch. As the display warmed up, he poured himself a small drink from the canter he had left out on the table. He took a drink and felt the dark liquid warm his throat and stomach, quelling his nerves. It seemed the first leg of his trip was coming to a close and everything had fallen into place. He took another swig of alcohol and let his eyes focus on the list of names hovering in the air before him.

He had asked Mnemosyne to generate a list of individuals that, when compared to his personal list Deffin provided him, would weed out potential ONI personnel aboard the Spirit of Fire. He knew that the likelihood of him being the only ONI op aboard the ship was slimâ€"Section I was always slipping their people onto colony ships to make sure the Insurrectionist threat was minimized. The short list floating before him had a mix of civilian and crew, but only a few names stuck out. And one person . . . he had already met.

Jonathan smiled. With the casual request to Mnemosyne, he could have any one of the individuals' cryo-pods "malfunction" and put an end to the possibility of departmental interference. Though, that might be a little too conspicuous. Other means of eliminating certain people during slipspace travel were limited to illness, accidents, or murder. Framing someone was possible, but Philip figured he'd have Mnemosyne keep track of the names on his now-refined list for later reference. There was still no guarantee that the list held ONI personnel.

He waved a finger through the holographic interface and a new list of names appeared. Nearly three dozen names in all, the list of security officers were handpicked, undercover ONI operatives from Deffin's personal division. They were ONI personnel, through and through, and on this mission they were Philip's private guard. "Only to be used in extreme cases," says Deffin. They were sleeper agents and they would only respond to the proper recognition codes Deffin had given him.

If Endres and others stuck their nose into Philip's business on Verent, he'd be sure to use any means necessary to eliminate resistance. Though, if his first option of subtle subterfuge worked, he wouldn't have to get his hands dirty. He chortled to himself out loud.

Deep down, he was hoping to go with plan B.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTE:

>I apologize for appearing to draw this first part of the story out for so long. I promise things will pick up soon, so stay tuned! And thank you for sticking with this backstory. My hope is to connect this with "Lost and Found" and then to write a sequel to that Halo Wars Epilogue.
Okay, i'm done._

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Outside the small, square viewport of the orbiting lunar station, the world of Verent was slowly turning into night. The dark blue ocean waters sparkled along the horizon as the local sun reflected its

light. The large southern continent was covered in tropical greens with accents of dark gray where the few mountain ranges cut across the planet's surface only to disappear into the sea. The northern hemisphere contained nearly a dozen smaller landmasses, each home to mostly desert and barren wasteland. Verent was tilted on its axis in such a way that the only long-term, hospitable area was the southern continent, but with the sheer size of the planet, it would be more than enough space to plant a colony.

"Beautiful, ain't it?"

Letting her eyes focus on the internal reflection on the viewport, Lorin Mason saw the tall man standing in the room's only doorway with his hands stretch to either side, clutching the doorframe. "What are you doing here, Jeffrey?"

Even through the hazy reflection, she noticed a wave of anger wash on his face, and it made her crack a smile. "I told you not to call me that," he growled.

Lorin folded her arms across her chest and turned around. "Well that is your name, isn't it?" she pressed.

He straightened up and pointed to the name patch on his right breast pocket. "Smuke, alright?" he hissed through clenched teeth. "We go by last names here, lady."

"Of course." She watched his face slowly dissolve into the stoic blankness that the crewmen usually wore aboard the station. Being sent to a live on a pre-colonial orbital station was, in some cases, seen as disciplinary action, and the disdain for their sentence was manifested on the faces of the dozen-man crew. Lorin knew at least four of the men had been sent here to orbit around Corra, Verent's moon, for punitive causes, and Smuke was one of them. "What are you doing here?" she repeated.

Smuke poked a thumb over his shoulder. "Fannon wants to see you."

She eyed him carefully but read no deception in his open stare. "What for?"

"How the hell should I know?" Smuke stepped to one side of the doorway. "Just head to the command nest, will ya?"

"Fine." Lorin started for the exit, trying to keep her wits about her. Smuke held out his hand in mock invitation for her to lead the way. "I don't need an escort," she chided.

She had one foot into the hallway when Smuke's hand reached out and grabbed her left upper arm. "Don't think you're above the rules, Mason," he bit out, his breath stinking of tooth decay. "_Others_ may not know why you're here, but if I had to guessâ€"

Lorin didn't give him a chance to finish his threat. She suddenly dropped her shoulder, loosening Smuke's grip, and then connected her elbow with his mid-section, doubling him over with a huffing gasp. As he bent forward she brought a stiff hand down against the base of his skull, spilling him to the floor in a heap. "I'm not here to follow your rules, _Jeffrey_. And I don't care for your opinion."

She stepped over his moaning form and headed for Fannon's "command nest," as they so colorfully called it. Truly the usefulness of these men to the CAA was miniscule.

The station reeked of mildew and rust, a byproduct of lackadaisical management and a lazy crew. Lorin felt more like she was traversing through an antiquated underwater vessel that had not surfaced in quite some time. Even the doors resembled hatches with cranking wheels to lock them. But her month-long stay on the orbiting lunar station had helped her get acquainted with the layout of the maze of passageways. She passed the lounge area where the majority of crewmen were playing card games and arguing about whose turn it was. No one noticed her.

The sole lift on the station was conveniently centrally located and she called it to her level with a tap on the flickering green button mounted to the wall. Even through the thick metal doors she could hear the gears creak and moan, and she was lucky enough to find it empty when it came to a stop. Some of the men on the station—like Smuke—gave her reason to be more alert, so she took to watching her back and keeping mostly to herself. After all, they probably haven't seen a woman in years, she thought, suppressing a chill down her spine.

As the doors closed and the lift ascended, Lorin examined herself in the warped reflection of the metal doors. Her cropped blonde hair came down to her chin, though it was currently in a tight knot at the back of her head. She blinked her dark brown eyes, making the point not to wear any makeup since coming to Corra. Even at the age of 31, Lorin took pride in keeping her body in top physical peak, though she often wore baggy clothing to hide her athletic build. It was the least she could do for her line of work.

When the lift arrived at the top deck level, she marched into the small foyer and knocked on the thick metal door to Fannon's place of hiding. Within a pair of seconds, the door swung inward to reveal Ronald Fannon, the station's manager, wearing a crooked grin. His thick fingers were gripped around the door wheel and he held the remains of some high-fructose snack in the other hand. His rotund belly bounced as he backpedaled and waved her inside. "Come on in, Miss Mason."

Lorin entered the oval-shaped room and immediately felt as if she was stepping back into some boyhood fantasy. The viewport-lined walls were caked in smudge marks and stains—of what she didn't want to guess. A single mattress was stuffed in between a large holopad and a refrigeration unit. Discarded wrappers of food were littered on the ground while the smell of decomposing leftovers stung her nose. Fannon's environment matched his persona. He was a large man, both in width and girth, and his thinning black hair was slicked back to frame large, bulbous eyes.

Fannon tossed his expended snack onto his cluttered computer desk and tried to straighten up. "What can I do for you?" he asked, running his gaze up and down her.

Lorin rolled her eyes. "You wanted to see me?"

"Ah, yes." He walked over to his holoplayer and turned off the

pornography he had been watching. The room fell silent and suddenly felt personal, confined, and even more uncomfortable. "You've been here a while, so it's about time you understood a few things." He somehow managed to find his pant pockets and stuff his fingers inside. He started to pace. "First off, I don't like that you haven't told me exactly why you are here."

"I was under the assumption that the Colonial Administration Authority documents that I gave you when I arrived would suffice for any explanation." She narrowed her eyes. "Do they not?"

Fannon sighed and connected his double chin to his chest. "The security clearance mumbo jumbo didn't make much sense to me. All it said was to grant you an indefinite stay aboard this station and nothing more." He stopped his shuffling and turned to face her. "So _why_ are you here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked, motioning out the nearest viewport to the planet spinning outside.

"Yes, the soon-to-be colonized world," he muttered. "I'm asking what your role in all of this will be."

"That information is classified," she said with a haughty smile. She could tell from his expression that her runaround games were not being tolerated. "Don't worry; I won't cause you any trouble."

"Hah!" he exclaimed. "Trouble, like what you did to Smuke down on Level 2?"

She pursed her lips. _News __travels __fast __on __a __tiny __outpost_. "He provoked me. Besides, maybe that will send a message to the rest of your crew to leave me alone."

Fannon snorted. "Not likely. I can't have some woman running up and down the decks, putting my men in the infirmary." He shrugged. "In any case, they're a motley crew and I can't monitor them all the time."

Lorin narrowed her eyes again. "Is that some sort of complacent threat?"

"No," he said, with raised eyebrows. "I just want to put things into perspective for you." He collapsed into his desk chair, nearly breaking it in the process from the excess weight. "Being out here, defenseless as the CAA has made this station, these guys don't like newcomers. Especially when they're not a replacement, and _especially_ when it's a woman that arrives that doesn't give up any . . . 'benefits' to the crew. It makes them suspicious."

He tried to sit up, but his chair was too small to accommodate the effort. Fannon leaned forward and glared instead, his eyes shadowing over. "And if that person happens to be an ONI spook, we toss them out the nearest airlock."

Lorin didn't give him the satisfaction of a response that he was obviously trying to ferret out. She knew better that to take his threats lightly, and if they wanted her gone for good, it might very well come down to a firefight. "I assume you've read the CAA

documents I gave you in detail," she replied, ignoring his line of interrogation. "If I don't report to the Spirit of Fire when it arrives in system, there's going to be a lot more for you to worry about than some apparition of an ONI spook."

The station manager seemed to fume for a moment, and she matched his stare evenly, sensing his stubbornness. "Are we done here?"

Fannon worked his jaw for a moment before grumbling and swinging around to his desk. He recovered the remote control to the holoplayer from underneath a pile of datacards and started his disgusting film back up.

Lorin spun on her heel and quickly left the command nest. As she took the lift down her thoughts swirled in her mind. Fannon had been off in his assessment of her—but not by much. Her mission parameters were clear and yet her objective would definitely shake up the colony plant. Her early arrival to the lunar station orbiting Corra had been planned to coincide with the possibility that the Spirit of Fire would leave Earth before the set schedule, but it could be weeks or months before she could leave Fannon and his cronies behind.

And Lorin knew it would only be a matter of time before she'd have to defend herself from another ruffian aboard the cramped station. But she would do whatever it took to see the commanding officer of the Spirit of Fire. No matter the means.

* * *

><p>The black void of slipspace was enough to make anyone manning the bridge to long for a dreamless sleep in Cryo. So when Malcolm came to relieve Endres after weeks of severe boredom, he greeted the Third Officer with a long face. "Finally," Patrick breathed, standing up and shaking Malcolm's hand. "Sleep well?"<p>

Malcolm craned his head back and frowned. "It's a cryo-pod. What do you think?"

Endres just shook his head. Malcolm was never one for playful banter. Testing the other man's patience, he bent down and patted the command chair. "Kept it nice and warm for ya."

Malcolm just grumbled under his breath and turned to the AI pedestal. "Mnemosyne, status report."

The AI's avatar bloomed into existence. Endres had always thought Mnemosyne to appear like an attractive specimen, but he was more concerned with the AI's original brain-imprint donor. She would've been real, but then again, she probably died a long time ago. Frowning to himself, he wondered if he had spent too much time looking out the forward viewport to let his mind wonder about such menial things.

"XO Endres?" Mnemosyne prompted.

"Huh?" he asked, hoping she hadn't picked up on his musings. When he spied Malcolm frowning off to his left, his mind caught up to what the Third Officer was waiting on. "Right, sorry." He straightened up. "Mnemosyne, I hereby grant Third Officer David Malcolm command of the

_Spirit __of __Fire_."

"And as Third Officer, I accept." Malcolm waved a hand to the AI's slender form. "Now, if you'd please."

As Mnemosyne gave Malcolm the executive summary on the lack of excitement slipspace travel does for a _Phoenix_-class colony ship, Patrick Endres thought curiously to himself. For all his concern about Lieutenant Philip and his shady behavior, the fleet-wide Vessel Captaincy Protocol was something that granted Endres a reprieve from his worry. In order for a lower-ranking officer to take control of the ship, permission had to be granted from his commanding officer. And any transfer from low to high had to be approved by the Captain_. Unless __in __extreme __circumstances, __if __Markus __and __I __are __both __incapacitated, __Philip __can__'__t __do __a __thing __to __disrupt __the __leadership __of __the __colony __mission_. And if it came down to _that_ scenario, then all was probably lost anyway.

Malcolm brushed past Endres and eased into the command chair. "I hate warm seats," he rumbled.

Patrick patted him on the shoulder and nodded to Mnemosyne. "Keep it clean." He started for the exit and called over his shoulder, "And if you need anything, wake me."

Mnemosyne smiled and a strand of black curly hair fell across her forehead. "Sleep well, Mr. Endres."

Malcolm just grunted.

* * *

><p>Not wanting to feel the sting of the after-effects of Cryo, Harper had stripped down to a pair of slippers and her lined jumpsuit that she mostly wore to bed. She kept her arms folded across her chest to preserve her modestyâ€"and her body heat, as the cold air coming from the Cryo Chamber seemed to snake its way through the corridors and hit her in the confines of the lift.<p>

Feeling more helpless than she did angry, Harper exited the lift and headed for Cryo Room 2. Frasure had told her only hours before that she could resume a probationary workload after the department-wide cryo schedule had run its course. There was still much work left to be done, and the fact that she wasn't allowed to help due to her "incompetence," made the rest of her fellow employees already brand her a screw-up. Harper figured the last bit of her reputation had truly gone down the refresher and jettisoned out into space.

So when the Security Officer that seemed to always have a knack for finding her at her lowest state appeared around the corner of the hallway, she sighed and tried her best to look chipper. "Hey, Jacob."

Snacking on some sort of fruit, he waved with his free hand. "Hey." When they reached each other they stepped to one side of the hallway to allow a trio of medical staff members walk past. "You headed to the freezer?" he asked with his mouth half full and his eyes glancing over her frame.

A brief flash of uncomfortable awkwardness heated her veins and she forced a smile. "Yeah."

Jacob raised one of his eyebrows. "You get things figured out with your boss?"

"Kind of." Harper's brows met, wondering at his casual demeanor. There was something to Jacob that she couldn't quite figure out yet, but his easy-going, phlegmatic personality was a welcoming change. "I'll have to see what his mood is like when we reach Verent."

Frowning, Jacob shook his head. "His mood shouldn't have to affect your job placement."

Harper shrugged. "I know, but what can I do?" As Jacob growled, she couldn't help but find his subdued outburst of anger towards Frasure a bit charming. She leaned against the wall and looked down at her feet. She shunted aside her own bitterness about the situation and tried to open herself up to talking on a non-confrontational plane. "I'm sorry I haven't been very social these past weeks," Harper said, feeling a bit guilty.

Jacob smiled and blinked his soft, hazel eyes. "Hey, you have a lot on your mind." He offered her a bite of his yellow, oblong fruit but she shook her head. "I really do just want to make myself available for youâ€_and_ Juliana. If you two need anything, I'm here."

Harper returned his smile with one of her own, but she detected a miniscule amount of smugness behind his expression. "You, 'the Security Officer,' or you, 'Jacob?'"

He pausedâ€"albeit a very short pauseâ€"but nodded his head. "Whichever you may need at the time." He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Of course, that depends if I'm on duty, you know," he said in an overly macho manner.

Harper let out a laugh and playfully smacked his shoulder with the back of her palm.

"You must be feeling a little better; you're laughing."

She blinked her green eyes sheepishly. "Yeah. Thanks."

He shoved the remains on his fruit into a nearby trash receptacle and wiped his hands off on his pant legs. "Would you like an escort?" he asked, repeated the same question he had back before she had gotten into the mess with the firebase DME. Jacob leaned in and grinned. "I _do_ have security clearance, so getting into Cryo Rooms 1 and 2 or 5 and 6 won't be a problem. . . ."

Harper rolled her eyes and mimicked his earlier exaggerated sigh. "Nice. Just when I was starting to like you."

She was rewarded with Jacob's face freezing like he'd just gotten poked by a needle. "Wait, what? Like me?" he asked an octave above his normal timbre.

Harper laughed again, this time through a closed mouth. "Just hold the fort down while I sleep, will you?"

He blinked his eyes a few times before finally smiling widely. "Yes, ma'am."

She winked at him and shoved off the wall, stepping into the small flow of traffic that was mostly female personnel heading to the Cryo Chamber. Harper kept smiling to herself, and when she reached the end of the hall she looked back to find Jacob looking at her, still wearing the same expression. She shook her head amusingly and turned the corner.

Of all the rotten things that had happened since she had taken custody of Juliana, she couldn't image things getting any worse. Yet Jacob's kindness was such a welcoming sight that she couldn't help but find him invitingâ€"even attractive. There were definitely greater things to keep her mind on, Juliana being one of them, but Harper was somehow hoping that establishing trust with Jacob was a way out of her rut. Being on an outer colony, reputation was almost as precious as credits, and maybe things could still turn around for her in that regard.

Harper Ackerman was still smiling when she entered Cryo Room 2.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

For the next several months aboard the orbiting station, Lorin Mason had mixed feelings about the crew's reaction to her run-in with Smukey and her subsequent meeting with Fannon. It seemed her message of being left alone had been truly taken to heart, as she had not been bothered once since her encounters. Her trepidation was founded in the complete lack of attention she had received, and it made her wonder if they were planning something. Fannon had become a complete recluse, locked in his tower and delving out orders via data-messages.

She almost wanted to pick a fight, just to remind them that she could take any one of them down.

Boredom was also setting in, and not for just the dozen crewmen. Lorin had read and re-read the files she had been given for the Spirit of Fire's last scheduled colony plant and she could probably recite every officer's first and last name, their place of birth, and how long they had been serving in the CAA's colonial endeavors. It was all useful intel, but her eyes were getting tired of the same text week in and week out. Her sleep patterns started to change; sleeping for nearly half a day then not at all for several days was a common occurrence.

Checking to make sure her door was still firmly locked behind her, Lorin headed out during the designated "late" hours of the night. She had been provided with enough supplies for an indefinite stay, but the small freighter she had arrived on had left the bulk of the station's last delivery in the cargo hold to be slowly divvied out over time. Lorin was running low on ration bars and water, things she had learned to live off of years ago, and she dare not ask Fannon if she could take some of his reserves locked away in the galley.

The station, and she assumed the crew as well, was currently in a lull of activity. Their current orbit took them around the dark side of Corra and the only illumination found aboard the station was from the dimmed glowpanels running along the corridors' ceilings. Some buzzed and flickered, another sign that the station's usefulness was coming to a close.

Previously a research platform for the colony, the Lunar Orbiting Station had recently been retrofitted and stripped of its probe bays and other long-range scanners, leaving it a hollow shell of its once former glory. Lorin figured there had been a few veteran crewmen that stayed to help Fannon, though she doubted they realized how quickly the conditions could deteriorate. _Or maybe they never cared in the first place_.

Lorin reached the lift only to find it currently in use. She growled to herself and started for the stairs on the opposite end of the T-junction. The stairs were extremely narrow, only permitting one person going one direction at a time, and she had a hard time believing Fannon could fit sideways, let alone normally. She was halfway down to the next level when she heard the lift come to a stop. Freezing, she slowly and quietly turned around and crept into the shadows of the stairwell.

Smuke and another crewman she couldn't recognize emerged from the lift and looked down the dark corridor before stopping in the middle of the intersection, both in close conversation. Their whispers echoed off the metallic walls as Lorin listened in.

"I'm telling you, the CAA doesn't like it when ONI interferes with colony business. If we can prove Mason is a spook, lock her in her room, and wait for the _Spirit of Fire_ to show up and tell 'em we bagged an intruder, then we can finally get a cushy office position back on Earth. Or hell, I'll take an inner colony for that matter."

"That's a lot of 'ifs', Smuke," the other muttered.

"Ã%lan, look. If we're wrong, we'll say it was for security reasons or something, but I'm tired of acting like our ticket off this station is never going to come. It's here, Ã%lan, and it's name is Lorin Mason."

Ã%lan shook his head. "Fannon's never going to go for this."

"He doesn't have to know," Smuke reasoned. "Besides, I think the fat-ass is losing it mentally. Pretty soon he'll be like Franklin."

"No one could get _that_ bad. Especially since the CAA sent those _Xanri_ pills with the last supply shipment." Ã%lan leaned in. "You're still taking your dosage, aren't you?"

"Of course. It's Fannon who concerns me." Smuke shrugged. "The man is taking enough to comatose a squad of Marines. I don't know how he's even functioning."

"And you're willing to risk upsetting the only ranking member of the station by hiding an ONI spook until the colony ship arrives?" Ã%lan shook his head. "Now I'm wondering if _you_ are popping too many

Xanri."

Smuke hissed a sigh. "Look, if you don't want to be a part of this, I can go ask Packard if he wants to help."

Even with the dim lighting, Lorin could see Å%lan's face scrunch up. "So you don't care about her physical state at all? Packard won't be able to keep his hands off of her, regardless if she's knocked out cold."

"You're right," Smuke laughed. "He is a registered sex offender."

Lorin felt her skin crawl and she suppressed a shiver. The fact that she had never ran into Packard told her that Fannon was wise enough to keep the brute stationed somewhere far enough away from herâ€"or maybe Packard was just biding his time.

"Well," Å%lan started, "when do you want to get started?"

"Let's wait till the end of the week. I bet we can hammer out the details of our plan by Wednesday, then I'll get with you about swiping Fannon's master passcode datacard." Smuke smiled. "In his current state, it should be too hard to steal it out from under his stubby little fingers."

Å%lan scratched at the stubble on his face before nodding. "Alright."

Smuke slapped the other on the back as they headed off towards their respective quarters. "Everything's going to fall in place. You'll see."

Å%lan muttered something else, but he was too far down the corridor for Lorin to hear. Taking a deep breath and exhaling it slowly, she realized things were about to get pretty crazy on the small lunar station. But what should I do?

As Lorin started down the steps to head towards the cargo hold once more, ideas poured into her mind. One way to deal with the two conspirators was to simply confront them and put them in the infirmaryâ€"or morgue, if it came to that. She also considered alerting Fannon of the plan, though if what Smuke had said about the station manager's mental state was true, then he might completely flip out. Or he might take their idea and instigate one of his own.

Two flights of narrow stairs later, Lorin arrived at the cargo hold as well as a conclusion. She realized that even outnumbered, she would be able to take down two intruders that no longer had the element of surprise. It didn't come from arrogance but confidence in her training. And she highly doubted that her sidearm was detected when she came on board, being stowed away with her toiletries. If Smuke and Å%lan were dumb enough to take her on, then she'd be ready for them.

She swiped her passcard through the reader and entered the room filled with shelving units full of supplies of every kind. Lorin quickly found the bins of foodstuffs and other necessities and consolidated the provisions into a near-empty container for easier

transport. She figured having more than enough to sustain her for a month would be advantageous, considering the _Spirit of Fire_ could arrive in a few days or weeks.

As she turned to go, her eyes caught the glint of something shiny fastened to the wall. Lorin frowned and walked over to find a trio of emergency breather masks housed in a thick plastic case. _Couldn't hurt_, she thought with a shrug. She took one of the masks and stuffed it inside her container. Her gaze drifted over the rest of the cargo hold, seeing if anything else was worthy of attention. There wasn't. Everything else she needed was back in her room. Content with her plunder, Lorin headed back the way she had come, keeping her eyes alert.

* * *

><p>The warning sirens screeched into the early morning hour, snapping Lorin Mason out of her day-long slumber. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the flashing red lights illuminating her cabin as her mind played catch-up with the circumstances. A glance at her wrist chrono told her it was 0330 Thursday morning. This has to be Smukey and Ælan's doing. But they're at least a day early. She frowned. _Then again, why would they set off the fire alarm?_

Confused, Lorin hustled to the thick metal door and placed the back of her hand on it. It was cool. The fire alarm could have been just a diversion, but she wasn't going to take any chances. She quickly tugged on her boots and pulled her hair back in a knot. Lorin grabbed her pistol from the footlocker at the end of her bed and donned on the emergency backpack she had packed on Monday. Along with extra rounds for her M6, she had all of her datacards, a few ration bars, hydration packets, and her set of credentials to show Captain Markus Alexander. And just to be safe, she grabbed the emergency breather mask stowed away in her closet.

She checked her pistol one last time, doubting that Fannon's no-weapons-allowed policy would be upheld in such dire circumstances, and slowly turned the wheel to open the door. Outside her room the hallway was bathed in red from the warning lights, and yet no smoke was found. Cautiously stepping out into the hallway with her pistol raised, Lorin kept her eyes alert with each stride. Hers was the only private quarters on this side of the station and she figured the bulk of the dozen crewmen would still be in their bunks across from the lift lobby.

It was eerie, walking down the glowing red corridor with no one else around during an emergency situation. _Maybe they have all been planning this for me._ She came to the lounge where she was expecting to find at _least_ a sign that it had just been vacated, but there were no empty bottles, or cards, or crewmen to be found. _Is no one even on shift?_ She checked the corners of the lounge with a sweep of her pistol and started for the lift lobby.

She was three meters from the arched entryway when she heard a gurgling sound. Lorin slid to the side of the hall, and slowly poked her head out. From her vantage point she could see a pair of shaking legs hanging out of the lift. As she stepped into the lobby she could see those legs belonged to Ælan who was sprawled on the floor, halfway out of the lift. His overalls were soaked in blood from what

was most likely a large gunshot wound to his stomach. It seemed he had fallen out of the lift only to try to crawl back inside and didn't have enough strength to do it.

His glazed-over eyes met hers and he coughed. "Mason," he wheezed.

Lorin checked down the other hall then positioned herself to squat down near Å%lan and still keep an eye on the stairwell. She could tell he wasn't going to make it much longer. "Where are the others?" she asked. "Where's Smukey?"

He shook his head and his eyes half closed. "Fannon," he breathed. "I tried to" He trailed off and his head rolled to one side.

"What about Fannon?" she hissed, smacking his cheek.

Å%lan seemed to muster up strength with a heaving last breath. "He's going to kill us all." He let out a racking cough and the expression of pain on his face froze then relaxed. He was gone.

Lorin swore under her breath. _Had Fannon found out about Smukey's plan and decide to take action_? Anger simmered in the back of her mind. Not only did Lorin have to watch out for Smukey, but Fannon had now likely gone completely mad.

A muffled roar echoed up from both the lift shaft and the stairwell as the metal floor shuddered for a brief moment. Lorin strained her ears and crept towards the stairwell. Another vibration nearly knocked her from her crouch and this time there was little doubt what it was.

Blast doors were slamming shut on the lower decks of the station.

Either from lack of use over the years or poor design, the huge metal doors were sending tremors throughout the lunar station, sounding off like a death knell. The emergency protocol was to help halt the spread of a fire by sealing off sections of the station and venting the atmosphere, but Lorin highly doubted the failsafe would work.

A tiny squawk of static caused Lorin to spin around and look back at Å%lan's lifeless form. A hiss of white noise burst through the tiny earpiece the now-dead crewman wore, and she hurried over and tugged the comm unit free from the inside of Å%lan's jacket. It was a simple two-way radio that the crew used when the landlines didn't work.

"Å%lan, you still there? What happened?" Smukey's voice asked from the earpiece.

Lorin dialed back the volume and placed it in her left ear. "He's dead," she said quietly.

"What?" Smukey growled.

"It's Mason," she identified herself. "I think Fannon killed him." Lorin swallowed when another blast door closed, this time sounding closer than the others. "Did you feel that? Fannon must be using the

fire protocol to seal off the lower decks. And he'll lock us here and kill us too if we don't stop him from venting this entire station."

"I'll deal with Fannon _after_ I deal with you," Smuke said with an eerie calmness.

"Listen, you idiot. From the sound of it, he's already begun sealing off the deck below us and if we don't stop him soon we'll all be dead within minutes." Lorin got to her feet and dragged Å&lan's body clear of the closing lift doors.

"She's right, Smuke," a tiny, distant voice said over Smuke's own comm unit, as if he was standing next to him.

"Shut up!" the enraged crewman answered.

Lorin pressed the lift button to take her two levels up, but the control panel gave a negative, three-tiered note sequence. The lift was locked due to the fire emergency protocol, and the control panel required a five-digit code that she didn't know.

"She's at the lift!" Smuke announced, only this time his voice sounded closer somehow.

Lorin bolted for the stairwell. She swung the door shut behind her and started up the stairs. The heavy clattering of boots against the deck gave her the clear indication that Smuke and the others were hot on her trail. She was about to fly up the next level's set of stairs when the door she had shut swung open and someone fired up at her. The pair of bullets ricocheted off the grated steps and struck the stairwell walls, one striking close to her face. She answered back with a few shots of her own and the figure in the doorway backed out.

"Leave her! We'll take the lift up and flush her out," Smuke yelled from down below.

Gritting her teeth, Lorin raced towards the next level, Deck 5, in hopes to beat Smuke and his cronies, but she paused and ran onto Deck 4. Doing a quick glance into the lobby and seeing no one else around, she fired three shots into the lift control box, hoping to slow them down.

It paid off. She was betting that Smuke would take a little time entering the code to activate the lift, thus buying her the precious moments she needed. The light above the exterior lift doors glowed a passive red and she returned to the stairwell, aiming her M6 down towards the lower levels.

She hurried up the steps to the level where the Emergency Evacuation Map told everyone to go. Feeling her lungs begin to ache, she charged up the last few steps . . . and almost got her head blown off. In the Deck 5 lift lobby, sheltered behind an overturned desk, was Fannon with a UNSC-issued shotgun and a feral grin on his face. Lorin ducked down the steps just in time, as another burst of buckshot nearly knocked the stairwell door off its hinges. Another pistol fired at her from two levels below and she pressed herself against the wall, taking aim at the culprit in the process.

But she never had to fire. The thick blast door on Deck 3 came down from the ceiling and took the crewman's arm off at the elbow, completely sealing off the stairwell from the rest of the level. Lorin gulped in a fresh breath and refocused on the other end of the firefight.

"No one is getting off this station," Fannon said darkly.

Even from the safety of the stairwell Lorin could hear Fannon enter a code on a datapad, and more thunderous noises thumped below her. She poked her head out just enough to permit her right eye to catch Fannon fiddling with his master security controller datapad. He quickly set it down and brought his shotgun up. "Not even an ONI spook!" He accented the last word with a blast from a single shell.

Luckily Lorin was ready for it and pulled back in time to let the door take the brunt of the blast and finally detach from its hinges. It slammed down on the landing and snapped in half. "What are you talking about?" she yelled back to Fannon, trying to get him to stop firing for one second.

"Don't play coy with me. I know Ålan and the others were planning something with you. If they thought they could take you right out from under me, I'll show them just how wrong they were." He cocked his shotgun once more. "You'll be my ticket off this prison!"

Another thud echoed through the station, only this one sounded like it was right next to Lorin. It took a second for her to realize that it wasn't another blast door closing. The lift had arrived on Deck 5. When the doors parted, Fannon swung his barrel over and fired. The two men standing in front of the group took the brunt of the shot and they slumped forward.

"Shut the doors!" Smuke ordered, but the two fallen crewmen's bodies stopped the lift doors from completely closing. Lorin could imagine the rest of the lift's occupants hugging the sides of the car while one tried to push or pull the dead out of the way. Another pistol joined in to return fire at Fannon and a round hit the desk in front of the portly man still firing towards the lift.

Now is my chance. Lorin crouched then sprung into action. From the layout she had previously studied, she knew the life-pod chamber was directly to her left, and she bolted for the open door while firing blindly back at Fannon. Someone else shouted something unintelligible and another firearm joined in the fight.

When Lorin was three paces away from the thick metal door, she suddenly felt a sharp pain stab through her left side only to be supplemented by instant warmth. She cringed and staggered the last few steps, as the blast door alarm sounded. She didn't even have the mind to swear and she leaped through the opening. The blast door slammed down behind her when she landed hard on the cold metal floor.

Lorin rolled onto her backside and sat up, wincing through the pain. Even through the sealed doorway she could still hear the exchange of gunfire, but another noise rose to take its place. It was a sloshing sound coming from behind her. And it was getting louder. She craned

her neck around to see that the round that had gone straight through her side had struck one of the hydraulic lines running along the wall that supplied the life-pod bay launchers. If the tubes didn't have enough hydraulic fluid in them, then the pods would not be able to launch. She needed to hurry.

Cringing and clutching her side, Lorin got to her feet, trying to avoid the growing puddle of liquid. The firefight outside sounded as if it had just ended and she risked a glance through the small glass slit on the blast door. What she saw didn't bring her much comfort. Fannon was bent over the desk, dead and bloodied, and Smuke was prying the master security controller from his hands. Lorin bit back a curse, jumped over the hydraulic fluid puddle, and started heading down the curved hallway that would lead to the life-pod bay.

"Get the door open, Smuke! She's going for the life-pods!" Lorin nearly stumbled to the ground when she heard the shrill voice scream into her earpiece that she forgot was still in her ear. She reached out to the wall to help stabilize her when she heard Smuke's response. "I don't know which door this one is. Hell, I'll just open them all up!"

With a moan that seemed to vibrate the entire station, every closed blast door opened simultaneously. And within the span of Lorin taking one shallow breath, the fire alarm klaxons wailed to life.

"What theâ€" someone called from around the curved hallway. "There really _was_ a fire? Smuke, you idiot!"

Why would Fannon risk the entire station by starting a fire? Frustrated, she threw the two-way radio to the ground. Lorin heard Smuke growl as she took up a defensive position at the end of the hall where the life-pod bay opened up and took aim back towards the voices. She heard Smuke and a few others swear aloud, and the sound of bodies hitting thick liquid echoed down the hallway.

"Get moving!" Smuke ordered.

When the first hydraulic fluid-drenched crewman came around the corner with a nasty looking pistol in hand, Lorin fired twice, striking him in the stomach and chest. He went down without as much as a whimper and the other crewmen hastily backed up.

"Mason," Smuke called from around the curve. "You know the high body count isn't going to look good on your yearly ONI review."

Lorin mentally rolled her eyes. "You just don't get it, do you? You're so selfish that you were willing to risk the lives of everyone aboard this station for a false chance of freedom."

"Look who's talking," he chided back. "This place is burning down and you're the one stopping us from getting to the life-pods."

A bitter reply was on her tongue, but she clamped her mouth shut when the pain in her side reminded her of the reality of the situation. Deep down, she knew she couldn't trust Smuke and the few that were left, but she didn't have to be a monster about it. "Fine. If you toss your weapons and come out with your hands up, I won't stop you from leaving."

Lorin looked over her shoulder at the two rows of six life-pods waiting to be released from the bay. She stretched out her left hand and primed the nearest one. But before she turned her attention back to the curve in the hallway, Lorin noticed one of the life-pods on the opposite side of the bay's walkway was missing. She froze. _Someone else has already left this station_. _What if it wasn't Fannon that had started the fire?_

"Okay, we'll come out," Smuke said. "Just don't shoot us."

Before Lorin could bring her focus back to Smuke and the others, a warm rush of air pushed through the hallway and knocked Lorin to the floor. The fire had quickly spread, faster than she thought possible, and blue flames started to spread along the ceiling of the hallway like spilt coffee on a table. Lorin backpedaled to the life-pod she had just activated and used its side railing to bring herself to her feet.

Lorin grabbed the medpack from the wall and tried to ignore the horrid screams coming from the doomed, hydraulic fluid-covered crewmen that had undoubtedly been lit on fire. She hopped in the life-pod and keyed the capsule-like door shut, wincing again as her side made contact with the uncomfortable rider's seat. The triangular window slit on the door allowed for a panoramic view of the blue flames beginning to snake down the walls of the bay. _C'mon, c'mon_, she urged the slowly-sealing hatch.

Checking the gauges, the fluid levels were dangerously low but would just be enough to get her one life-pod off the station. She pressed the release button and hurried with the restraint harness. A five tonal countdown started.

With two tones left to tick off, a bloodied, burning hand slapped against the right edge of Lorin's view. Smuke's charred face then appeared above her through the window and he screamed something incoherent. Lorin closed her eyes, and with the last chime of the countdown, the pod disengaged from the station with a sputtered kick, leaving Smuke behind in the flames.

As her life-pod rocketed away from the lunar orbiting station, Lorin could see the extent of the damage and she shuddered. The lowermost decks were blackened beyond repair and the middle decks that housed the orbital thrusters were already void of power. The only thing that had not yet been touched by the fire was Fannon's tower, a monument to the man's own destruction.

From Lorin's best estimate, the station wouldn't completely burn itself to dust before crashing onto the dark side of Corra, but it would most likely leave a giant stain on the moon's surface for years to come.

She looked down at the pod's auto-trajectory course and tried to relax. Being so close to a moon without proper atmosphere, the life-pod's computer had sent Lorin on an orbital course with Verent instead. With luck, the pod would safely tuck into the planet's atmosphere, waiting for a response from the distress signal it was now emitting.

But there was another life-pod out there, somewhere floating around Verent as well. Lorin could only guess as to who had left before her,

but it was beyond her scope of speculation at the moment.

As her adrenaline began to come down, the throbbing in her side reminded her of more immediate concerns. Lorin managed to remove her backpack, pull her blood-stained shirt off over her head, nearly scrapping her elbows on the metal ceiling, and examine the wound. It wasn't anything life threatening, but she did want to patch it up quickly. The round had only gone through a thin layer of muscle, entering and exiting only inches apart. Using the medpack's contents she was able to disinfect the bullet wound and wrap her lower torso with meditape. It would slightly hinder her movement, but she wasn't going to do much of anything until she was rescued.

And if the Spirit of Fire _is_ _on schedule, they should be arriving any day now_. As the life-pod's maneuvering jets oriented its course for the last time, Lorin took the emergency thermal blanket stuffed under her seat and settled in for a long wait. Her eyes began to grow heavy as she watched the world of Verent slowly turn below her.

End
file.